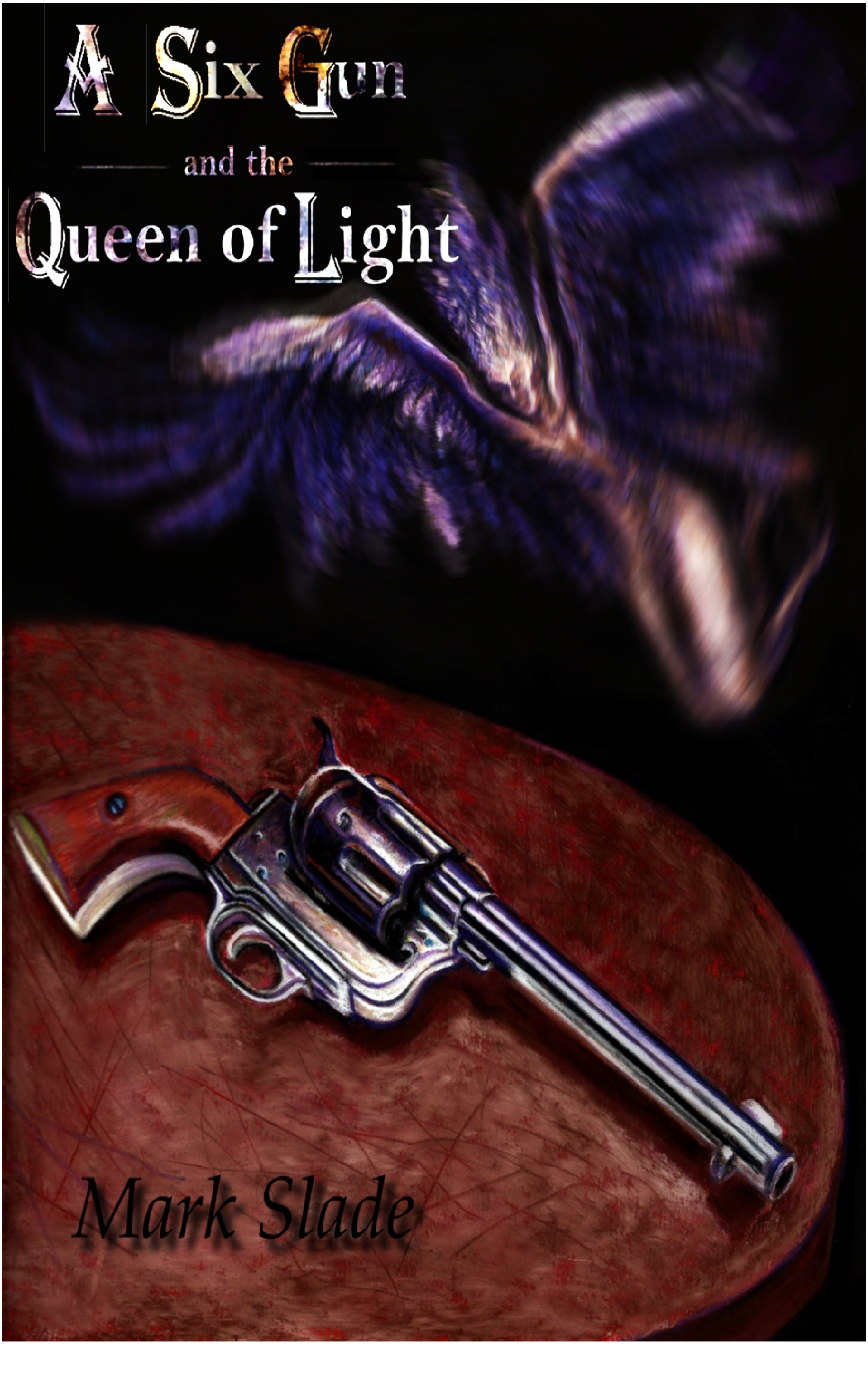

A Six Gun
and the
Queen of Light
Mark Slade

A SIX GUN
– AND THE –
QUEEN OF LIGHT

By

Mark Slade

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ONE

Logan rode into Bedlam feeling queer. It had been a long trip from Triton city across the Indian Territory. He'd been riding for two weeks, seeing nothing but the plains and plenty of rain. He shot a wild boar and ate as much of it as he could before hitting the dark trail that led to the town of Bedlam. It occurred to him that he may not have cooked the boar as thoroughly as he should have. He knew for sure when he was doubled over on his saddle and his horse carried him to a livery stable to drink water.

The owner of the livery stable found Logan passed out on the dusty ground by the watering hole, his foot still caught in the stirrup. The man was smaller to Logan in height, but outweighed him by fifty pounds. Still, the man threw Logan over his shoulders and carried him to his barn.

Logan awoke, his head reeling, stomach turning over, to find himself on a bed of hay. He saw the pug-faced man that brought him there and placed him on the hay with gentle care. The man was smiling at Logan, offering a ladle of water.

Logan refused the water, shook his head. “Where am I?” he asked with a groan.

“In my livery stable. Your horse carried you here friend,” the pug-faced man said with a laugh similar to a donkey Logan knew when he was ten. He hated that donkey for killing his collie by kicking it in a barn, laughing about it.

“Much obliged – ” Logan tried to get up, only his legs wouldn't obey his brain's command.

“I think you should stay where you are Mr..?”

“Logan. Sirus Logan.”

“Now that's a name no one could ever forget. I'm Nat Bramble,” The pug-faced man put his hand out and Logan touched it briefly. “You make your living by that gun, don't you, Mr. Logan. I can tell by how worn your holster is... the gun in it.”

“How do you know I didn't steal it?” Logan rubbed his blurry eyes.

“Sometimes you can just tell. Can't always explain gut feelings but you know how to read them. Don't worry. I wont spread the word, unless you want me to.”

Logan shook his head. “Don't need to advertise,” he said.

“Thought so. I took the liberty of asking Doctor Abram to look you over. He should be here soon,” Nat said. He put the ladle back into a water trough after he swallowed a bit of his own. “You in town on business?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” Logan snapped at him.

“Yeah. I guess I am a bit nosy.” Nat laughed and Logan cringed.

After a few minutes of uneasy silence, Logan abruptly spoke. “That trail into town... it sure is dark – even in the day – no sunlight. Why is that?”

“I don't know. It's always been like that. Loneliest trail I ever rode. Rarely even see any birds... other wildlife – ”

“Except boars!” Logan sucked in pain from his gut, a sharp stabbing pain that

sent his head reeling again.

“You ate one of those hordes?” Nat laughed.

“What the hell is a horde?” Logan held his stomach with both hands and rocked himself slightly.

“It's something you shouldn't eat,” Nat said.

“I'm kind of curious.” Logan sat up , grunted. “What kind of town is Bedlam?”

Nat grinned, pushed his cow-lick out of his eyes. “It's like no other town you've ever been, Mr. Logan.”

“They all say that.”

“I don't know who “they all” are friend, but I guarantee you'll be telling the next person what I just said.” Nat walked over to the table where Logan's gun belt lay. “My old man was a gunman, Logan. Not a very good one. He'd take whatever job came along – robbing stages, killin' men for a drink. The only good thing about him was he took care of my mother and I as best he could. He was, no doubt, one of the most wicked men to ever come to Bedlam. When he was gunned down by a sixteen year old boy, over a card game, I wept. The next day, when he was buried, I spat on his grave. Vowed to never touch a gun. I haven't. That boy got away with a fifty dollar silver coin with a chip in it. I expect he's dead now too. I at least hope so.”

Logan sighed. “Some things were meant to be.”

“Yeah.” Nat flashed a smile. “That they are.”

Boots on the platform outside the livery station was heard. The door opened and a short, stout man of forty-three appeared carrying a little black bag. The man looked much older than his years. His handlebar mustache was brown but the beard and hair on his head was completely white, and the crevices in his face were deep and wide.

“Ah, Doctor Abram. He needs your care.” Nat pointed at Logan and smiled.

“What's wrong with him?” Doctor Abram was gruff. His outburst sounded more like a cough.

“He ate a horde, Doc.” Laughter followed Nat's bellow.

Doctor Abram bent down to examine Logan. He pulled his shirt up, touched Logan's swelled belly. “Why in the blazes did you eat a horde?”

“What's a horde?” Logan managed to say, his world becoming evermore blurry.

“Something you're not supposed to eat!” Abram yelled at him. “You idiot cowboys – roaming the range, eating anything that moves.”

“He ain't no cowboy, Doc,” Nat said. He pointed.

Abram’s moved his eyes to the gun belt laying on the table. “Figures. What are you in Bedlam for mister?” Abram stood quickly, grabbed his bag.

“That's my business.” Logan moved his hands around his swelled belly and grunted in pain.

“You better tell him, Mr. Logan, or Doc wont treat you,” Nat said in a seriously tone.

“If you are here to kill someone – ”

“I'm not!” Logan blurted out. “I'm here to see Genevieve Queen.”

Nat and Abrams exchanged looks. Abrams knelt beside Logan, opened his black

bag and took out a bottle of brown liquid. He opened it and pulled Logan's head to the bottle's opening. Logan drank from it, nearly spit out, but Abrams made sure he swallowed every drop of the elixir.

Logan coughed. His head felt heavy. He laid back, closed his eyes. Within a few minutes he was off into dreamland.

“He going to be alright?” Nat asked.

Abrams sighed, wiped his chin with the back of his left hand. “I don't know. Homer Kelsey ate one of those damn things last year. Remember what happened to him?”

“Oh, yeah.” Nat nodded. “I remember. Somebody should tell Genevieve about him.”

“Wonder what that's all about?”

Nat shrugged his shoulders. “Always thought Genevieve was a peaceful lady.”

“She has something planned. I'm going to keep my nose out of it. I suggest you do the same, Nat.”

“Who says I'm being nosy?”

“I do!” Abrams gathered his little black bag, headed for the door. “There's never been a man who seeks out more trouble than you, Nat. Like I said, keep out of it!”

“Well,” said Nat. “What ruffled your feathers today?”

TWO

Jim Fagan didn't like to sleep.

He avoided it as much as possible. That's why he went to the witch woman out by the swamps. She would fix him a powder that could keep him awake for weeks. That would enable Fagan more time to play his stick game. The stick game was Chinese, brought over to America – and this game had helped ruin his life.

The game consisted of six bamboo sticks and a spinning top. You hold the bamboo sticks, all numbered, your opponent holds the spinning top, ready to pull the string. When you toss the sticks in the air he pulls the string and the spinning top spins till it levitates. The sticks fall randomly, picking numbers that match in a row to the numbers the top picks when the metal sides open. The numbers appear in the air, quickly disappear.

Fagan won just one game – his first. A secret was whispered to him. After that he was obsessed.

Fagan was a store owner at one time. Dry goods and cattle feed. It was a good business. He had a good marriage to May. May had been a distant cousin and they had met at an Uncle's wedding. Soon they started corresponding. Fagan sent for May once they had made their feelings known to each other through the letters. They were married the next week. It didn't take long at all for them to try to conceive a child. That was number one on May's list to accomplish. They were still trying when tragedy befell them.

He met Horace Favor. Favor was passing through Bedlam. He was out checking the railroad's progress for 'Myers and Sons'. One late night he introduced Fagan to the game. After one game, Fagan was hooked. The rules were complicated, but winning just one game was always within his grasp. The two of them would end up spending whole nights playing against an old Chinese man with a long goatee and long white hair. His fingernails too were long, and were always wrapped around a pipe filled with an opiate not familiar in any opium dens in the railroad camps.

When Fagan would stumble home in the mornings, May let him know she wasn't pleased with him.

The arguments ensued throughout the day's work – keeping the store running – customers being town folk and cowhands, not understanding what a man had been up all night – sometimes two nights in a row. That afternoon, Fagan was punched out by Daniel Rowe for mentioning the hump on Rowe's back.

May wouldn't speak to him for a week. Things went downhill from there for Fagan.

His business suffered when a rival Swede moved into town, set up a store across the street. Pretty soon not even a drunk stumbled into Fagan's store to beg for

an old bottle of scuttle hooch. Scuttle hooch was corn whiskey made with rainwater, and eventually Fagan began to drink it to cope with his bad luck through recent events in his life and bad luck in the game.

But winning just one game became an obsession.

They lost their house, their business. Fagan and May had to move into the town hotel, amid onlookers, to hear laughter at their backs. May was sinking deeper into a depression and Fagan ignored it. She put on a brave face – all smiles. She never left the hotel room, felt even lonelier than when Fagan found a job as a stable jockey. After high shift he'd come home with a bottle of rye they would share and a plate of vittles from Smokey's bar that included deer elk and greasy carrots. Later, Fagan would slip out while May was pretending to be asleep and gamble the last two dollars of the week's wage.

May was all set to leave Fagan. She wanted to start all over in Minnesota. Fagan found he had a way and the right words to keep May, promising that once he wins another game he would quit. Every time he played he was almost there… that one win. In the final moment of the game the old Chinese man would win again.

When Fagan would come home, May would be in bed – waiting for him to lay beside her, give her body his touch. She would ask, "Did you win"?

Fagan would undress in silence. Then he would climb in bed. "No," he said, curling his long, gangly arms around her warm body.

May would sigh, and the tears would roll down her cheeks as she sobbed quietly.

In the morning, Fagan found May lying beside him, the sheets covered in blood. Her wrists had been cut – his razor in her hand. The expression on her face was one of pure ecstasy – glad to be out of the situation she was in. Fagan stumbled out of their hotel room, ran down the street, screaming May was dead.

That night, Fagan went to see the old Chinese man.

"Another game..?" the old Chinese man asked. He was sitting on a tree stump in front of his tent by the railroad. A fire burned bright, red-orange embers floated past them.

"I want to die," Fagan said weakly.

"I don't believe that." The old Chinese man sniffed the air. "I understand your pain my friend. To die would do her an injustice."

Fagan closed his eyes. He tried hard not to let the tears start again. It was a fight he was doomed to loose every time he thought of May. "It's all my fault… "

"The wind can carry the past if you let it. If not, it becomes a constant dark cloud looming above."

"Words… just… words… I need something… to kill the pain," Fagan told him. He fell to his knees and began sobbing.

"You wish to play the game?" said the old Chinese man smiling. Blackened, broken teeth protruded above his bottom lip. He showed Fagan the bamboo sticks and spinning top.

Fagan's hand trembled.

Yes. He wanted to play the game.

His mind became cloudy, all thoughts turned to that secret about the crops he planted a year ago. The crops the spinning top told him would grow if he planted them pointing east.

Then there was the vision of May lying in their bed, blood dripping from her limp wrist, razor in her hand.

Fagan took a pistol from his belt, aimed it at the old Chinese man. “No... ” His voice faltered. “I’m going to kill you so you can never play this Devil game again with some other poor soul.”

The old Chinese man shrugged. “It matters little. The stick game is everywhere the Chinese are. We are where the railroad is… and we are in Bedlam. Kill me if you wish. I think you want a game.”

Fagan squeezed the trigger and the pistol screamed thunder and lightning from its barrel. The bullet struck the old Chinese man in his chest, killing him instantly. It was more of an accident than on purpose, and if anyone found Fagan out that’s what he’ll tell 'em.

He wanted to make it look like a robbery. So Fagan went through the Chinese man’s things. He found thirteen dollars and decided to make it an actual robbery. He placed the paper bills in his pocket – continued tossing things around until he found a bottle of elixir. He opened the bottle of light-brown liquid. It smelt like rotten eggs.

He thought, *What the hell, the booze would help bury the memory of May.*

It burned as it went down his throat. His mind clouded over again. He felt dizzy and passed out.

He awoke and noticed he was in a room with several people. A saloon girl named Betty was on the lap of a cowhand named Goya. He spoke Spanish to her and she giggled. Another cowhand burst through the doors of the saloon and shot both of them.

The saloon faded – as did the people.

Fagan came too and found himself where he last stood, where the dead Chinese man lay with a bullet in his chest.

At sunrise, Fagan rode into town. He hitched up his horse and went directly into Smokey’s saloon. He ordered a beer and a whiskey. He felt hot breath on his neck. He turned and saw Goya behind him. Goya looked confused – worried.

“You… you were there?” He touched the brim of his beat-up hat. “Please… tell me… how did you get into my dream?”

“I – ” Fagan couldn’t find the right words. He drank down the beer, then the whiskey. He looked at the Mexican, shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about friend.”

Goya smiled, nodded. “Yes. It was all my dream – nothing real.” He smacked Fagan on the back, whooped happily.

Goya went back to the corner table and pulled Betty on his lap. She giggled. A cowhand burst through the doors and shot Betty and Goya. The cowhand walked out like nothing had happened.

Later that night, after drinking away all the money Fagan had stolen from the old Chinese man, he found a ditch behind Doc Abrams place to lounge in – call home.

THREE

Nat had just emerged from the 'Ladies of the Night' tavern smelling of whiskey. He stumbled across the street humming to himself. The street was dark and near deserted – save for a few strolling or the occasional horse and buggy. He was just at the corner of the 'Lonesome Hotel' when he felt something jab him in the back.

"Don't move, dunderhead." Nat heard a voice.

"What the hell?" Nat raised his arms slowly, turned to find its source.

He saw the Howard brothers pointing guns at him. The tall one, Quinn, held a 'Winchester', aiming for Nat's head. Harley (the smaller brother) held a 'Colt' at Nat's chest.

"What's all this about, boys?" Nat slurred his words, clucked his tongue.

"Two hundred dollars, dunderhead. That's what its about," Harley said, his top lip curled.

"Yeah, dunderhead!" Quinn moved behind Nat.

"Don't keep repeating after me, Quinn!"

"Sorry, Harley." Quinn lowered his head as he spoke.

"Oh... you holding me responsible for that bet? I was drunk when I made that." Nat had trouble keeping his balance.

"You bet on that Rooster, boy – knowing all that time that rat was gonna win that fight. You ain't too bright." Harley laughed.

Nat shrugged. "That rooster had metal spurs on... sharp as knives! I didn't know that rat would sprout wings and use bird-like flight abilities to attack."

"Pay up, dunderhead, or we fill you full of lead." Harley cocked the hammer on his 'Colt'.

"Oh... boys... there's no need to threaten – "

There was a clicking noise behind the three men. Quinn turned first, dropped the 'Winchester'. He ran as fast as he could, kicking up dust behind him. Harley turned too fast and his 'Colt' went off, pointed at his left foot. The bullet exploded inside Harley 's boot. A hole the size of a silver dollar exposed a bloody mess that was the top of his foot. Harley went down, clutching at it, screaming like a jackass caught in a briar patch. Nat backed away, started to sprint from the incident.

Logan stepped out of the shadows, sheathed his six-gun. "Nat!" he called out. "It's just me! Logan!"

Nat stopped in his tracks, tried to catch his breath. He walked slowly to Logan, a hand across his heaving chest. "Damn you, Logan," Nat croaked.

"I just got Abrams more business." Logan bent down, examining Harley.

"You bastard! Lookit what you made me do," Harley start to sob loudly.

"Help me get him to Doc Abrams," Logan barked.

Nat shook his head. “No way. He was gonna shoot me.”

“And you were gonna welch on a bet. I wouldn't blame him, except I couldn't let him.” Logan put a hand under Harley's arm, helped him to his feet.

Harley, still crying, held the injured foot up.

Nat puckered his lips up, blew out air. He helped balance Harley by lending a shoulder for him to lean on. “Why couldn't you let him shoot me?”

“You are a dunderhead. You saved my life earlier. I owed you. Now we're even.”

Nat smiled. Maybe he had made a friend other than Abrams. Life might not be as empty. Voices other than a horse's whinny would be nice.

“You're a bastard... both of you – ” Harley sobbed.

“Did he cry this much as a kid?” Logan winced with every sob that came from Harley.

“I only saw him cry once – last week. That was when his father whipped him with his horses reigns,” Nat said, struggling to keep pace. “He wrote dirty words on the outside of the church.”

“Lucky preacher didn't get him,” Logan said.

Nat turned to Logan. “Harley's father is the Preacher.”

Four

After taking Harley to Abrams, being cursed at by Abrams, Nat let Logan buy him a few drinks in the 'Watering Hole' saloon. Abrams lived upstairs and had his office there, which was convenient when a shooting in the saloon was almost as often as Sunday school. Doctor Abrams joined them at a table in the back of the room.

“How's Harley?” Nat sucked down another shot of whiskey.

“Fixed him up, dressed his foot.” Abrams took a seat beside Logan. “I thought you weren't here to shoot anybody?”

“I'm not! I didn't shoot him. He shot himself,” Logan said. He poured himself a whiskey, downed it quickly. “Never saw such a fool thing in my life. And you... ” Logan turned to Nat. “Didn't your old man teach you better than to welch on a bet?”

“It wasn't intentional. I haven't the money.” Nat touched the bottle whiskey and Logan took it from him.

“You had money to get liquored up,” Logan barked.

“That was my birthday money. And no... he didn't teach me better. He was too busy being the town bully, killing people for money – like you.”

“I don't kill for money. I offer protection.” Logan offered Abrams whiskey. He held up his hand, shook his head.

“Is that what your doing for Genevieve Queen?” Abrams raised an eyebrow.

“In a manner of speaking.” Logan smirked.

“Go on,” Nat said. “You know you want to tell us.”

“No!” Logan poured himself another drink. “I don't want to tell anyone. I just want to know where she lives so I can go see her.”

Abrams sighed. “You don't want to get caught up with Genevieve Queen.”

“Oh. And why not, Doc?”

“Do you know who she's married to?” Abrams fired back, his top lip curled.

“I didn't even know she was married.” Logan wiped his mouth with the back of his left hand.

“So you waltz into a job without knowing anything about what it is, or who the employer is? That's a bit stupid,” Abrams said.

Nat smiled. “Dunderhead!” Nat cracked himself up.

“A job is a job, Doc. When you're out of luck with silver any job will do.”

“Even if it gets you killed?” Abrams took the bottle from Logan, handed it to Nat. A huge grin spread across Nat's face.

“Why don't you just tell me why I shouldn't get mixed up with Genevieve Queen?” Logan took the bottle out of Nat's hands just as Nat was going to finish it off.

“She's married to Clem Graves He not only owns this town but he will kill any

man that so much as looks at Genevieve.”

“She sent me a letter,” Logan finally said. Then wished he hadn't. “I'm to escort her across the plains.”

“Why in heavens..?” Nat looked perplexed.

“I don't know myself. That's why I need to speak to her.”

“You know you will never see her away from her husband,” Nat said.

The door to the saloon opened and closed. A tall, grimy man appeared. His face was covered in dirt and his clothes were torn, barely on his body by thin stitching. He stood waiting for a sign to approach the table. Abrams mumbled under his breath. Logan turned and saw the man. Abrams motioned for the man to come over.

“Friend of yours, Doc?” Logan leaned an arm on the back of the chair.

“Yes,” Abrams said. “I'm afraid so. Mr. Logan, this is Jim Fagan: the town drunk.”

“Doc,” Nat cut his eyes at Abrams. “You don't have to tell strangers that!”

Fagan smiled half-heartily. He brushed a cow lick from his eyes. Logan noticed there was even dirt in the man's beard. “It's okay, Nat. Doc just calls it as he sees it.”

“Jim. How is the gout?” Abrams stood.

“A lot better, Doc,” Fagan said wild-eyed. His hands began to shake.

“I guess you want a game?” Abrams took Fagan by the arm.

“You know I do, Doc. I... I can't live without it!” Doc grabbed Fagan by the arm and led him to another table.

“Card games are a terrible thing,” Logan said.

“Oh!” Nat laughed. “They don't play cards. It's another game entirely.”

Fagan took six bamboo sticks out of his coat pocket, laid them on the table. Abrams picked them up, inspected the six-inch trimmings. The markings on each one, numbered one through six, were the same as last time they played. Abrams nodded, set them back down.

Fagan sat there, a huge grin on his face, watching Abrams take a white porcelain spinning top from his coat. Abrams slid a thin string through two holes on each side of the spinning top. He set two bits on the table. Fagan shrugged, gave Abrams puppy dog eyes.

Abrams showed distaste in his eyes. “Alright,” Abrams barked. “We'll play for drinks, too.”

Shakily, Fagan picked up the bamboo sticks, all six, waiting for Abrams command.

“Go!” Abrams screamed. He pulled the string through and the porcelain top spun around in a blur.

Fagan tossed the bamboo sticks in the air. The sticks came up with numbers 1, 3, 5, 2, 1. The top stopped spinning. It levitated in the air, hovering in the middle of Fagan and Abrams. Four sides of the top opened outward, and numbers appeared and disappeared.

None of them matched in threes. Example: 1,1,1. Fagan had random numbers, none a match.

He closed his eyes, put his face in his hands. He began to sob loudly.

Logan gave Nat a look. “Game's that important?”

Nat nodded. “To him it is – turned him into the town drunk. He used to own the ranch next to Ed Gorman. That's where your client lives now.”

“How in the world did he..? No. What would make a man..?”

“Mr. Logan. In that porcelain box are secrets – secrets that some people should never know. On a chance game with a fellow from China, Fagan here had won one game. The secret he learned was his crops were going do very well if he planted on the east side of his spread. By God, that's what happened. Ever since then he's had to know more secrets. Been stuck on that damn game like a man stuck on a woman.”

At that moment, a saloon girl with fire-red hair stepped up to the bar to talk to a dust-ridden cowboy. Logan watched her like a hawk. He stood quickly, took some coins from his pocket. “Speaking of women...” He let his words trail off as he took long strides to the saloon girl. He whispered in her ear. She cackled in a high pitch screech.

The saloon girl ordered a bottle of Rye whiskey, took the bottle from the counter and sashayed up the stairs. Logan carelessly tossed down several coins and joined her. His hand stole up her skirts as they disappeared at the top of the stairs.

Nat laughed. He yelled over to Fagan and Abrams, “Horses are getting lonely. I'm heading to bed”.

FIVE

They hung him from a dead branch of an oak tree on Miller's ranch. There were seven of them – all dust ridden cowboys from across the valley. They believed in God and the Devil, and that they were carrying out appropriate justice to a horse thief. It really wasn't the thief's fault. Out on the range, anything was bound to happen. The range told you who you were by the hardships you had and how you dealt with them.

Miller was the boss to mostly mindless bodies that worked for him on the ranch. He stood watching the lifeless body drifting between the breezes of a blood-red canvas sky. Ten minutes later it be just about dark. His wife would be home from visiting friends. She wouldn't care to see another body swinging from that tree. Already she has seen three this year (The fifth month of 1874).

The other three men Miller hung were rustlers. Oh yeah, they claimed no knowledge that his cattle were out roaming free, or six head were stolen a few months before. It was time for action. Those three kept talking and talking. They pleaded with Miller, prayed to God, and confessed many sins. They were placed on their horses, hands bound behind their backs and nooses carefully tied round their necks. When gunshots were fired, the horses rode off in a blaze. The ropes caught their necks. That's when the dance with the rope and the oak tree branch began its torrid affair with them.

"You want us to cut him down?" Miller's foreman stepped closer to the oak tree. In the distance a shrill cry came from the dark. Most assuredly a prairie dog.

"No," Miller grunted. He kept staring out towards the dark flatland, as if he were waiting for someone to appear. "You take the men back to the ranch. Call it a night."

"Wont Mrs. Miller be back?" the foreman said. "She ain't going to like seeing this dead man – "

"It's none of your concern what anybody likes or dislikes," Miller bellowed, "least of all what my wife likes. It's your job to do as I say, or you can collect your pay in the morning and get the hell off my ranch. Your choice mister."

The foreman batted his eyes, thought a few seconds. He nodded – motioned for the other men to follow him. One by one the work-hands mounted their horses and rode into the dark. Miller was left watching the hanged man swoon with the gentle breeze the country had to offer.

The sound of wheels on dirt could be heard. Miller turned quickly. His wife was back from visiting friends in town. The path leading to his ranch ran right by the hill where he stood. As soon as the wagon pulled next to it, he heard Anna's cry. Miller sighed. Wearily, he went to the wagon.

"Evening, Mr. Miller." The driver tipped his hat.

“Evening, Gus.” Miller climbed up on the wagon.

He saw Anna curled up in her shawl, trying to hide her face. She was sobbing softly. Miller touched her honey-brown hair. She flinched.

“How could you?” She spoke from behind her hand. “You promised you wouldn’t do this again.”

“Anna,” Miller whispered. “You don’t understand.”

She turned to him quickly. Her pale blue eyes were red from the tears and from anger.

“I understand that my husband has no respect for my wishes – that he loves to destroy everything around him!”

“Now hold on there!” Miller pointed a finger. “This man was caught stealing a horse from our stable, and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let anybody steal from me!”

Anna spoke calmly, softly, through flared nostrils. “You are right about the damned part.”

They exchanged looks. Miller withdrew his finger, bit his lower lip. He had more to say. He thought better to keep his peace for the time being. “Take me back to the house, Gus.” Anna wiped her tear-stained cheeks with the back of her right hand. “I don’t think I can stand the sight of him another second.”

Miller knew she wasn’t talking about the hanged man. Miller nodded to Gus.

“Yes ma’am.” Gus jumped the reins and the horses had a spurt of high energy.

Miller turned to the hanged man. The man’s face looked as if he was smirking at Miller. Miller grabbed at the butt of his gun. He thought of replacing that smirk with a couple of bullet holes. Then he thought better. He eased his nervous fingers from his gun and mumbled a few curse words.

“Something so beautiful about death,” a voice said from the dark.

“Why don’t you just fade away,” Miller said.

It drifted out from the darkness, as if it hadn’t used its legs to walk at all. The creature glided, feet never touching the ground. It was a Drago: a low-level demon that fed off the recently deceased. This type of demon collected the leftover energy from dead souls for its own life-source and existence. But this particular Drago had moved up in the levels of Hell. It was able to barter with humans, promise things, and even present to its human contact their desires as illusions – in regards to being able to grant them a better life. This Drago was there to collect a soul.

Underneath the Drago’s bare feet, a path of dead grass and crop lay on an otherwise fertile land. The Drago looked human, but had only a shell of a body that moved very stiffly – as if rigor mortis had set in. Its skin was gray and flaky. Its eyes were two deep, black hollow holes with tiny yellow pupils. The Drago was dressed in dead man’s clothing, this time from a preacher – a white collar and a weather-beaten, tattered coat.

“Always on time, eh Drago?” Miller said, stone-faced.

The Drago half-shrugged. “Punctuality is a virtue, I've always found.”

“Yeah,” Miller snarled. “Patience be damned.”

“I detect cynicism, my friend,” the Drago said.

“I’m not your friend.”

“Oh… but you are – since our turbulent war between the states.” The Drago smiled, and a horrible stench filled the air around them.

It was true the demon and Miller met ten years ago on the battlefield in Appomattox. Miller was laying there with a gunshot wound in his leg when he noticed something or someone was feeding on a Union soldier he had killed. Miller had used his last bullet to shoot the demon. There was no blood, but a large hole between the demon’s eyes which had healed itself in mere seconds.

“We have done business since then,” the Drago reminded him. “You provide the human flesh with their weary souls attached… I provide the wealth, the rich lands… the good times.”

“Look, demon. I think… this is my last for you,” Miller said.

The Drago was examining the hanged man. “Oh,” it said, walking around sniffing the air. “As you wish… human.”

“Well... ” Miller took his knife from his belt. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Don’t want this one.” The Drago shook his head slowly, grinning. “Oh, no. Oh, no.”

“What do you mean?” The anger rose up inside Miller. “This one is just as good as the others.”

“I heard no confession of sin or guilt from this human. Remember, no confession, no Drago.”

“Then what the hell are you here for?” Miller held the knife to the demon’s chest. The demon gently pushed the knife point away.

In the distance a single gunshot echoed thoughout the land.

Miller turned toward the ranch. “Anna… ” he whispered. The he screamed as he straddled his horse.

It was calm inside the main house. No sounds at all. The men that worked Miller hadn’t stirred at all. That was odd. Anything that rummaged through the house – a pot hitting the floor – his men were there to check it out.

Miller called for Anna. No sign of anyone. The servant was nowhere to be found – not in the kitchen or in her room. But in the bedroom, Anna lay in a pool of blood beside the bed. Her eyes were wide open, lips pursed, and her face was blood-splattered. There was a wound to the side of her left ear. She still held the 'Colt' firmly in her hands.

Before a tear could fall from Miller’s eyes the Drago was there, with Anna in his arms – feeding off of her.

Miller drew his gun and fired. The Drago screeched like an injured animal. There was a flash of white and Miller was drawn toward the demon. The Drago held an open palm to Miller’s forehead.

“I CAME,” the demon said in a gravelly voice, “for her.” Miller was enveloped by the white nothing – swallowed up completely. “And for YOU!”

***

He was hanging from a dead branch of an old oak tree. Miller swung gently with the soft breeze the country had to offer. His men stood on that hill and watched from their horses. Somehow, none of them were that surprised by this. They'd always known Miller would be damned – eventually.

SIX

In the morning the sun rose high. Already a blistering day out in the plains, the sun burned its light harshly on the town of Bedlam. In the streets, the debri from a saloon (two doors from the one Logan had stayed the night) was scattered across the street: blood stained pieces of wood and clothing.

Logan walked out from his saloon – saw the damage. A man in a bowler was sitting in a rocking chair smoking a pipe.

Logan looked over at him. “What happened?”

The man blew black smoke from his pursed lips. “A horde came into town. Tore Jim Brubon's saloon apart.”

“I thought they only stayed out in the plains,” Logan said.

The man burped up his breakfast, took a puff. “They do. It's when they bite someone and they change into a horde. The people bit always come into a town.”

“Your pulling my leg,” Logan said, his eyebrows arching down.

“Nope.” The man took a couple of puffs. “If a person is bit, the poisons from that creature spreads – then a change comes. You grow tusks from your snout, fangs from under your bottom lip, hooves instead of feet and hands.”

Logan sighed. He took off his hat and ran a hand through his short ginger hair then placed it back on his head. “Son of a bitch,” he whispered.

“What?” The man stopped rocking in his chair.

“I ate one of those things,” Logan said matter of factually.

Astonished, the man removed his pipe from his mouth – raised an eyebrow. “Why would anyone eat a horde?”

Logan shrugged. He turned, spied Nat at the livery station.

“I thought it would be mighty tasty” was Logan's answer.

“You didn't tell me I could turn into one of those things,” Logan screamed at Nat. Nat hadn't seen Logan come into the barn. He nearly jumped out of his skin.

Nat dropped a bucket of water. “Into what?”

With a low growl, Logan came across the left side of Nat's face with an open hand slap, then a right cross from the other side. Nat flew into a pile of hay. It took him a few seconds to get it together. He sat up, touched his sore jaw with a hand.

“What'd you do that for?!” Nat yelled, voice breaking a little.

“I like people to be straight with me.” Logan stepped forward. He grabbed Nat by his shirt lapels, picked him up off the ground. He brought his face close to his. He could smell Nat's breakfast. “That horde I ate! You could have told me what that thing was.”

“Doc didn't want to tell you... I swear it was him.” Nat's voice cracked again. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

“That's all right friend. Me and Doc will be having the same conversation, like this.” Logan dropped Nate. He fell hard on his back.

Nat scrambled to get back on his feet. “Logan!” he called out. Logan was already outside of the barn. Nat ran, stopped at the open doorway. “Logan? You can't hit an old man! It's not right!”

Logan unsheathed his 'Colt'. He waved it at Nat. “Who says I'm gonna hit him!”

Nat caught up with Logan in the middle of the street, barely missed by a stagecoach. Logan stopped and turned to Nat. Nat was scared. He took a few steps away from Logan.

“You can't kill an old man,” Nat said nervously.

Logan just stared at him, nostrils flared. His eyes were moving back and forth, back and forth. His brain was adding things up. In the distance, somewhere under the hot sun, an eagle was adding punctuation to this bit of swordplay.

“Take me to Genevieve Queen,” he finally said.

Reluctantly, Nat agreed. He nodded, flashed an uneasy smile. “I'll get us a couple of fresh horses.”

SEVEN

Suddenly the sky was bathed in blood.

Gorman sat on the cold, hard ground – dust in his mouth and blood in his eyes. How many were still alive, Gorman didn't know. He felt woozy – weak every time he tried to get up. A bullet had caught him in the scalp earlier and the blood dripped into his eyes. Gorman didn't stop shooting, though. Windom's men were going to meet their maker, come hell or high water.

Gorman had come to Bedlam to get away from the killings. Robbing stagecoaches and a bank in Freefalls, Idaho. That was the job that turned his stomach. He had been there with a friend, just to ride around with, and was sucked into keeping a posses horses ready for when the job was done. Freefalls had been robbed too many times. They were barely inside the bank when someone on the roof with a rifle started shooting at them. Gorman's friend lay in the doorway of the bank, the top of his head missing. Gorman began to ride off when a woman took a 'Colt' from under her skirts and shot Gorman in the shoulder.

Gorman shot her out of instinct.

At nights, he either ended his sleep with her image or began it. Either way, the nightmare made it hard to fall back to sleep. Now… here he was, sitting in the middle of town – no more bullets in his 'Colt', blinded by a bullet or his own blood, hoping his ordeal was over.

"Get up." Gorman heard a soft, low voice – a woman's voice that was as smooth as silk.

Two hands helped him up.

"Nancy?" Gorman said to the darkness.

No answer.

"Let's get you somewhere," she said.

Gorman coughed, tried to get the dust out from his throat.

"You did miss me, Nancy," he told her.

Gorman kept hold of her tightly as they walked back to the wagon that was waiting on them. She helped him inside – as did another pair of hands. He laid down, tried hard to get his eyes to focus. He felt the wagon jerk after a male voice called out for the horse to go.

"Of course I missed you," she said lying beside Gorman. She held his cold, clammy hands.

"I'm sorry I left you." Gorman sighed. A ray of sunlight invaded the darkness, cut through his brain like a pinch from a crochet needle. "I wish I had never heard the name Peter Windom."

Windom hired Gorman to off a sheep herder out of the valley. Nancy had been

friends with the sheep herder’s family. Their family name was Dobbs. When Nancy found out what Gorman was up to, she broke off their engagement.

“I only did this job for us.” Gorman coughed up more dust. ‘So we could have money to live in that little ranch I bought out by the edge of town.”

“I know,” she said. “Let’s not talk the rest of the ride.

Gorman didn’t like that. He felt they had a lot to talk about, but he did as he was told.

The ride to her house was nothing more than an echo of bottled-up thoughts. Gorman wept. He couldn’t help himself. It was too much for him. The loss of promised love, the gunfight with a former employer over morality and money owed for previous jobs. A hand touched his cheeks. The tears were wiped away.

“Here,” she said. “Let’s not have any more of that.”

The bed Gorman was laid on was hard as a rock and just as cold. He tried to put it out of his mind. For the longest time he heard nothing but voices – a few footsteps. He thought he heard a clock striking the time. Gorman couldn’t keep track of the hours. He kept losing consciousness. The last time it happened, a warm hand woke him. He then felt a warm rag wash over him.

“Nancy?” Gorman could barely manage to speak. He reached for her hand. It was warm and soft. It smelled like Nancy: like honeysuckle – like spring. He felt a strand of hair touch his cheek. Gorman remembered those few nights they spent together, and he remembered he was the only man she’d been with.

He felt the warmth of her lips upon his. He began to speak. A hand shushed him. For a while longer those lips caressed his.

There was more silence. His eyesight was still blurred. More hours passed. He was left with nothing more than his thoughts. Those thoughts turned to the last big mistake he made.

Especially how the gunfight broke out with Windom, he couldn't quite recall. Gorman didn’t call Windom out to the street. The argument was in the saloon. A room full of people stopped their commotion to hear their words. Gorman had failed to remove the sheep-farmer from the valley, even though he’d killed the head of the Dobbs family. Windom had demanded Gorman finish the job. Gorman wanted to be paid, no matter what. He didn’t want to do anything else to that family. He'd watched the youngest daughter weep over her father’s dead body. He said he would do another job to repay the money. Windom called him yellow.

Gorman shot him in the chest – at close range. No thought to it. No regret.

Gorman left the saloon, his boots hitting the dusty street. First shot came from his right, a doorway of the general store. Two of Windom’s men were firing at him. The other came from the horse trough. Gorman fired twice at the man in the general store – caught him both times in the neck. He fired at the man at the trough – barely missed him. The man dropped his gun and ran. Just then three more bullets sailed past him from the saloon. He turned, fired again. He didn’t know if he hit anything. A bullet pressed deep into his skull. Blood dripped into his eyes. Gorman felt himself fall to the cold, hard ground.

“Nina!” Gorman heard a man’s voice. “I told you to leave those cadavers alone!”

A blond-haired woman in a dirty dress, barefoot, jumped off Gorman’s lap and ran out of the mortuary.

A small, mustached man in an apron called out to her. “All I want you and your brother to do is collect the dead bodies and the payment! Now get!”

I’m sorry, Nancy, was Gorman’s final thoughts as he slipped under a blanket of darkness.

EIGHT

Just on the outskirts of Bedlam was Graves ranch. It was the same as any other ranch in Bedlam, except Graves ranch had more steers, more horses, more workers, and at times, the best beef sold in Chicago – also the longest trail run in the west. Not many men have worked for Graves longer than a year. He was tough, outspoken, and completely in control of everything tied to his ranch – which was now starting to look like a Federal outpost, for all the armed guards at his gate.

His hold on his wife – now taking the name of Genevieve Queen Graves – was absolute, and she had become something of a local poet. Of course, against Mr. Graves wishes, her celebrity had attracted a few scholars eager to meet this great lady of letters. Many were frightened away from the ranch by Graves men – never meeting her.

Logan and Nat faced these armed guards. There were five: two that stood on the ranch wall which was connected to a strong, iron gate and three patrolling in front it. The guard that spoke first was a tall man with a 'Springfield' rifle in his arms. He went by the name of Calder. He was Graves number two, and had been with Graves for five years – even had a hand in building the ranch while Graves and his then new bride had stayed in town. Calder had a scar across his chin from a knife fight with a Mexican when he was in Texas years ago. Logan was tempted to ask if he wanted another.

“State your business,” Calder demanded, sucking on a cigar that hadn't been lit in days. Remnants of loose tobacco were caught in his wild, greasy beard. He kept swooshing it from one side to the other.

“We would like to see Genevieve, Calder,” Nat said.

“You know I'm not going to do that.” Calder laughed. He urged the other men to laugh with him. They sounded like a pack of hyena's on helium. “The old man not around and you wanna see his wife? Fools that attempt to rush in... usually get shot. Who's the toad with you, Nat? Looks like a hired killer.”

Logan laughed along with them. “I'm Rev. Logan.” He smiled big. “I'm here to sell Mrs. Graves a bible is all.”

“Show me me the bible, toad.” Calder held his 'Springfield' steady on Logan as he approached slowly.

Logan held his hands up. “I'm not armed, as you can see.” He held his hands up high for the guards on the wall. “I have the bible in my saddle bag. May I show it to you?”

“You don't look like a bible-thumper,” Calder said.

“I'm dressed this way from a day or so. Out in the badlands, some men wanted to bushwhack me. They saw how I was dressed and let me pass. I'm just a man of

God, I swear to you!"

Nat was looking at Logan sideways.

Is this the same fella who knocked me on my ass earlier, saved my life the night before, and ate a horde – almost died? Now he's pretending to be a preacher? He ain't all there!

Calder let out a sigh. He lowered his guns. Then his fellow guards did the same. "Reverend. I'll let Mrs. Graves know your here."

The other guard on the ground opened the gate – took the reins of Logan's horse and led them through.

"Jesus, Calder. I thought you were going to shoot us," Nat laughed nervously. He tapped the sides of his horse to follow Logan, but Calder aimed his 'Springfield' at Nat. Suddenly Nat's horse stopped. "What in tar-nation?"

"I said he could go through, not you, Nat," Calder said. He spit something long and gooey out of his mouth. The saliva splattered the dusty ground by Nat's horse.

"Calder... we've known each other for years," Nat pleaded.

"You don't have business with Mrs. Graves, just the Reverend. Sit tight. He won't be long."

Calder backed away inside the gate still holding his 'Springfield' steady on Nat. The gate shut quickly once Calder disappeared from sight.

"Damn it all to hell," Nat said, dismounting from his horse. He looked over at the guard who was leaning against the gate smiling at him. "How do you like that? You grow up with somebody and think you know them – "

"Shut up, stable boy!" said the guard, wiping sweat from his forehead. "Yer giving me a damn headache."

Nat snarled at him, found a shady grass spot a few feet from the gate and sat down. He tipped his hat down over his eyes, rested a bit.

Calder took Logan to the house. Logan tied the reins of his horse to a post and watched it drink from the waterhole. He waited for Calder to enter first through a new oak door. Logan touched the door with his hand and thought to himself how expensive it must have been. Calder looked back at Logan.

Logan smiled. "Nice door," he said.

Calder gave him a queer look. "You coming in or what?"

Logan nodded – followed closely. The house was spotless. No dust in a typically dusty area. There were trinkets everywhere and furniture made from oak. Paintings of landscapes had been hung in the drawing room – including a large canvas portrait of a dark-haired beauty. It must have been the lady of the house – wearing a white dress of lace, white gloves, and the latest, fashionable hat with feathers. Her deep, dark eyes seemed to be peering into Logan's soul.

"Good day," a woman's voice said.

Logan slowly turned to answer her. It was the woman in the painting, those dark eyes still glaring at him – now in real time.

"I'm Genevieve Graves." She stepped forward, touched Logan's hand.

Loan smiled huge. "I'm Rev. Logan, Ma'am. I'm here to deliver the bible you

ordered?”

She was taken aback by his comment. Seconds later she realized what he meant. “Oh yes. Won’t you sit and visit, Rev. Logan.”

“Yes. I think I will.” Logan sat on a white sofa – as soft as a pillow in a Chicago hotel bed he once stayed in.

“That will be all, Mr. Calder.” She had confidence in her voice.

Calder thought about it, decided not to challenge her.

He nodded. “Certainly, Mrs. Graves. I'll be outside in the hall.” He left the drawing room and closed the oak double-doors.

Logan was mesmerized. He had never seen double-doors before. He was like a child in the tallest building, lost in his own wonderment.

When they were sure Calder was not listening at the door they began to talk. She was uneasy, kept looking at the door. They spoke only in whispers.

“I can't believe you're here,” Genevieve said.

“Here in my breast pocket, I have your letter.” Logan touched his heart with his left hand. “How did you come to choose me? I'm sure there's other local men who would help you.”

“My servant, Nadia, knew of you from Missouri.”

“Oh. And have I met this Nadia?”

“No. She witnessed you in a fight with three men over a little old man in a saloon. The man was performing Shakespeare. They were teasing him and you stepped in – took care of them. She heard a few town people in St. Louis talk of you. We hired your... talents.”

“St. Louis was a few years ago. Nadia wrote the letter.” It was more of a statement than a question. Genevieve nodded yes anyway. “She never stressed what your concerns were, Mrs. Graves. Only said you needed help and five hundred dollars was mine.”

“That was her instruction,” Genevieve said, her eyes shot over to the door. “I need you to take me away from my husband.”

Logan had a smile on his face. “Is that so? I'm not in the habit of stealing wives. You’re not happy?”

“Happiness and duty are two different things, Mr. Logan. I need to get away forever.”

“Why don't you just leave?”

“You don't leave this man, Mr. Logan. He's very dangerous. Do you want the job or not?”

Logan thought of how much money he had and the amount of food he had had in the last six months. Slim pickings. “Where do I take you?”

“The badlands.”

He thought for a moment. “There's nothing there. One town a hundred miles from here.”

“Oh, believe me, Mr. Logan, there's more there than you know. I need a stage for my servant and me.” She breathed uneasy. The thought of carrying this plan out

seemed to be a little overwhelming for her. “I will pay for the stage, horses, and supplies.”

“We start tomorrow. I will need another man... a driver.”

“I'll pay him as well,” she said. She heard footsteps, shushed Logan. The footsteps went away.

Logan stood up and shook Genevieve's hand. “Must be pretty important – you getting away – for you to do this.”

“You'll be a hero of sorts, in my eyes.”

“We can do this tomorrow night. We will be right outside the gate. Is there any way you can slip away from the guards?” Logan handed Genevieve a bible.

“I think I can come up with something,” she said, walking Logan to the door. “I have to warn you, my husband is a very dangerous man. He doesn't like to lose.”

“He's going to have to come to an understanding, Mrs Graves,” Logan said.

“And what's that, Mr. Logan?”

“I live to shatter dreams. Good day to you, Mrs. Graves,” Logan spoke in a voice loud enough for everyone in a three mile area to hear.

“Good, Rev. Logan.”

Logan rode outside the gate, Nat tailing him. They rode a ways east toward Bedlam before speaking.

Nat had to be the one to unravel his tongue first. “Well?”

Logan smiled mischievously. “Well what?”

“What did she want to hire you for, clod-head?” Nat rode up beside Logan, anxious to hear more.

“She wants me to whisk her away from darling hubby in a stagecoach,” Logan said.

Nat stopped his horse. He just stared at Logan. Logan turned his horse around to face Nat. His horse was now still, smelling the dusty road.

“You're crazy,” Nat said. His eyelids batted a few times before he spoke again. “That man owns Bedlam. He will hunt you two down with his own men and buy a militia if he needs to. He won’t let that woman go... I'm telling you!”

Logan ignored Nat. He tapped his horse and rode away from him with a small gallop then slowed down to an easy pace.

“Who is gonna drive that stagecoach?”

Without looking back, Logan said, “You are”.

Nat's face turned red. “What?!”

NINE

They were at Smiley's Saloon having a few drinks with Doc Abrams and Jim Fagan. Fagan was barely conscious. He kept slipping in and out of sleep, waking suddenly then nodding off again. Logan touched Fagan's shoulder. Fagan jumped. He blinked – looked right through Logan.

“Are you alright?” Logan asked him. Fagan nodded.

“This is a terrible affliction Jim has to deal with on a daily basis,” Abrams said. “It’s one of the many reasons he drinks too much.”

“Doc! Tell Logan what he's about to do is crazy!” Nat jumped in the conversation. Worry had caused the frown lines across his face to spread.

“I have to say, I'm not looking forward to pronouncing your death to the world.” Abrams drank the rest of his glass, slammed it on the table. “If Mrs. Graves wants to leave it's between her and that husband of hers.”

“Doc! That woman is crazy... loco... She wants to go out into the badlands,” Nat said through his nose.

“By God, she is. There's nothing out there – ”

“I'm not asking anyone's permission!” Logan hopped up and kicked the chair from under him. He took a fighting stance, like he was going to draw his gun. “You don't have to come, Nat. I can get somebody else that's less the color of yellow.”

It was quiet all through the saloon – only a few customers, other than Abrams and present company. A man in a derby hat sitting at the bar, nursing a beer, would look up once in a while. But the saloon girl, a buxom blond with a wide chin, was sitting two tables over with a cowhand that laughed in a high-pitched, weaselly way.

“He acted like he was gonna shoot or somethin',” the cowhand told the saloon girl.

Logan slowly turned to the table where the cowhand sat, his hands sliding down the front of the saloon girl's dress. “Did you say something friend?” Logan asked. A small growl rolled up from his throat.

The cowhand laughed again. He whispered in the saloon girl’s ear. They both giggled. His was even more ladylike than hers.

Logan walked over and stuck the tip of his boot under the chair and tilted one of the legs up. The cowhand and the chair were separated. The cowhand found himself laying on the cold hard floor of the saloon.

“That was not smart, peckerwood,” the cowhand said getting to his feet. He had his right hand at his back, digging in his belt. “I'm about to help you to enter Jesus' parlor.”

The cowhand produced a knife from behind. The blade was six inches and as wide as his hand. With the flick of his wrist that knife was airborne – en route to

Logan's midsection. It never reached him. A small black ball came out of nowhere, a red-orange flame trailing behind it. The black ball hit the knife on the side of blade, deflecting it from Logan. It fell to the floor and stuck into one of the loose floorboards beneath Logan's boot-heals.

Logan grimaced. He took three steps to the cowhand before the man in the derby hat placed himself in the middle of the argument, holding his hands out in front of them both.

"Whoa, boys," the man said. "No more of this foolishness. Go sit and have a drink, shake hands. Horace! Apologize! In the morning you can collect your knife. Stranger. Let bygones be bygones. You can stay in Bedlam. That sound alright?"

"Sorry, Sheriff," the cowhand snarled – kept his eyes on Logan. "Didn't see you there."

"Go on ahead, Horace. Go drink at Butch's place. And don't start no more trouble!" Sheriff said.

The cowhand left through the swinging doors, hooting and hollering.

"That is a mighty strange choice of weapon, Sheriff," Logan said.

"Sheriff Wilkes." He bent down, picked up the small, glowing ball. Sheriff looked at it a few seconds, placed it in his breast pocket. "Sheriff Bob Wilkes, stranger."

"Folks call me Sirus Logan."

"You're in town on business, I have heard." Wilkes went back to the bar, drank the rest of his beer. "Genevieve Graves is a very nice woman, Mr. Logan. I can't say the same for Graves, though."

"Yeah." Logan sighed. He was tired of the same old story. "I keep hearing that, Sheriff."

"Maybe you should listen."

"And how is that?" Logan added a bit of venom to his tone.

"That cowhand that just left... "

"Yeah? Ain't forgot him."

"He works for Graves... ramrod." Wilkes nodded to the bartender, walked past Logan to the saloon doors and pushed them open. He turned to Logan, smiled. "Just thought you should know that. Good night."

Nat put a hand on Logan's shoulder. "I ain't complaining or worried, Logan. Before I was. The way you handled things just then made me remember what you're doing and why. I'll help you get Mrs. Graves where she needs to go."

Logan looked over at the bartender. "Joe! Get the boys another round... on credit."

The bartender saluted Logan and went about the business of pouring beers in glasses when it dawned on him.

"Hey!" the bartender said. "You ain't got no credit in here."

Nat laughed, ushered Logan back to the table Doc and Fagan were at. "Put it on my tab, Joe."

Reluctantly the bartender went back to the beers, mumbling under his breath.

"Tab is as long as my arm, peckerwood."

TEN

In the dead of night a scream was heard throughout the town. An old woman was running down the street banging on doors, calling out for help. No one opened their doors. They heard the growling, the screeching cry echoing. The old woman saw yellow eyes trailing her. She could feel it on her heels, the four-legged beast that only makes an appearance at night.

Just as she came upon the livery stables a door opened. Logan appeared, his 'Colt' drawn. He saw the creature leap into the air. It was inches away from the old woman. Logan fired twice. The creature screamed out, fell to the ground. It had taken a bullet in the right eye and another in the chest.

The old woman dropped to her knees, grasping at Logan's pants. She was weeping, mumbling a name over and over.

Nat came outside holding a lantern at the creature. It was a horde – body long, big as a dog with gray, curly hair and yellow eyes. It had an elongated snout with two large tusks hanging from its lower lip. On all four paws were long, gnarly nails – as sharp as razors. If anyone survived its attack, it was a sure bet the change to that creature was inevitable.

Nat looked up at Logan. “Good thing you came out when you did,” he said.

“Especially when nobody else would.” Logan shook his head. “Cowards! The whole damn town. Wouldn't even help an old woman.”

“Wait,” Nat said. “Look at it!”

Logan stepped up to the light from the lantern. The old woman followed. She screamed, hid her face in Logan's shirt.

“My Paul,” she said. “My Paul!”

The horde had made a transformation back to a frail, naked old man. Logan didn't know what else to do but put his arms around the hysterical old woman.

“This town is starting to leave a bad taste in my mouth,” Logan told Nat.

Nat shrugged, licked his lips. “Nobody wanted to take a chance getting attacked. You can understand that right, Logan?”

“It's almost sunrise.” Logan's top lip curled up. “Take her to the hotel and get her a room. I'll pay later. Get her some breakfast. And don't wake me until later. Me and you have to get a stagecoach on short notice.”

The old woman walked to Nat slowly, took his hand. As they headed toward the hotel she turned and looked back at Logan.

“Go on,” Logan said to her. “Everything is alright... now.”

Logan went in the opposite direction to Doc Abrams place, to the top of Joe' s saloon. He ran up the stairway quickly. Logan banged on Abrams door. He heard grunting. Someone yelled, “Go away. Can't a man sleep around here”?

“Open up, Doc. It's me, Logan.”

The door crept open. Abrams stood there bare. His legs were flimsy. His eyelids were droopy. “What do you want, Logan?” Abrams voice croaked.

“Tell me everything you know about the horde.” Logan pushed past Abrams.

Abrams threw his hands in the air, shut the door. “Come on in,” he said. “What can I tell you?” Abrams pulled a chair over for Logan.

Logan sat – rubbed his eyes. “Am I going to change like the others?”

Abrams thought a minute. “I don't know. Never been around anyone who has eaten a horde.”

“Thanks. You're a big help.” Logan rubbed the back of neck with his left hand.

“Don't get ornery with me. I didn't tell you to eat one of those things!”

“Doc... a lot of people here in Bedlam have been infested by those things. Any reason for it?'

Abrams shook his head. “I can't seem to understand it myself,” he said pacing his tiny room. It was obvious he was a bachelor. His clothes were all over the place.

“When did it start?”

“We've had a dozen cases since Wellerman moved here. He built a new oasis just outside of town, toward Cherokee hill.”

“I passed it along the way. Didn't stop there, was fine at the time on... water. Does he supply the valley too?”

“As a matter of fact he does,” Abrams said.

Logan stood, went to the door.

“Wait!” Abrams grabbed his pants. “I'm coming with you, but not half-dressed.”

“Just seeing what's in that well, Doc. Not getting involved.”

“I can't see Tom Wellerman doing evil on purpose.”

“Some don't see the doing as evil, but necessary for their own purpose.”

ELEVEN

Abrams and Logan rode out to the oasis. It was desolate. Two barns and a house were off in the distance. No cattle, horses, people, or critters of any kind were present, just a well with several ditches for the springs to flow – east for Bedlam, west for two or three ranches, south for a community of Quakers and north for the valley and its residents.

The sun was rising, and it was too bright for Abrams. He shadowed his eyes from the sunlight. “Kinda strange, no one here,” he said.

Logan looked around, tapped his horse on the side. The horse jumped to a slow trot. Abrams followed. “Not sure what to make of it, Doc. Should be somebody around... or something stirring. Not even a buzzard here.”

“Hate to say this,” Abrams yawned. “I guess we should check the house.”

'You know Wellerman?”

“A little. He keeps to himself. As long as the town makes its payment we got our water – same for the valley and the ranches in the west. I once doctored his daughter. She had the measles – almost died. He was thankful – paid twenty dollars.”

Logan smiled, shook his head. “I'd say he was real thankful.”

They came upon the house. From the way it looked, no-one had been taking too good care of things. High grass had started to cover the porch; tree limbs growing through the windows.

Slowly, cautiously, they dismounted from their horses. Abrams was no coward – but he was no fool either. He let Logan enter the house ahead of him via the front porch. Abrams was nervous. No two ways about it. He kept looking behind him, then turning to make sure things were fine in front of him.

“I don't think anyone lives here,” Abrams whispered.

“Then there's no reason to whisper is there,” Logan said.

“I don't want to disturb someone. What if a woman was dressing?”

“That would definitely make my day.”

They heard a board creak. Logan turned, his gun already drawn. Abrams swallowed hard, stifled a scream.

It was crawling across the floor, slowly, this half-man, half-creature they call a horde. It's clothes were torn, ragged around its waist. The skin on the creature's right side was human, pink, bare... with sores. The left side was hairy – wild, black curled hairs like barb wire. It's fingernails were long, like claws. It's face was a collage of a man, pig snout and tusk.

Abrams gasped. “It's Wellerman!” Abrams took a step forward, thought better of it.

Wellerman gurgled, tried to speak. Finally, the words came, slowly.

“Help... me... please... ” He crawled closer, his hand stretched out to touch one of them.

Abrams backed away from him. Logan and he exchanged looks. Logan sighed.

“Please... ” Wellerman begged. “Mesa... she can help... Mesa... ”

Logan cocked his gun, fired once. The bullet struck Wellerman through the forehead. Blood splattered the floor, leaving it to resemble a modern painting. Wellerman was dead. And Logan felt he had committed no crime, but helped a soul pass to Heaven.

Abrams sat down in a nearby chair feeling weary. He took his hat off, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. “Godspeed, Wellerman. Godspeed. I wonder where the rest of his family is at?”

Logan holstered his 'Colt'. “I imagine they are no longer with us. What did he mean, Mesa?”

“Mesa... I think it's the witch in these parts. You've seen these people in towns?”

“Oh... yeah. Dealt with one in Kansas City. She local?”

Abrams nodded. “Yeah. In a hollow just a few miles away.”

“Doc... you a believer in magic?”

Abrams laughed. “That's a joke, sure.”

“You sure are afraid of what you don't believe. I watched you a few minutes ago.”

“I didn't want to get – ”

“Diseased? Yeah. You didn't try to help him too much friend. You were afraid.”

“If you didn't have that gun, you would be too!” Abrams sputtered.

“Why would I be afraid of one of those things? I ate one – remember? Let's go see this mesa.”

“You expecting what?”

“A cure. A cure for me... and this afflicted land.”

“If she don't give a cure?”

Logan smiled. “I guess there will be one dead witch.”

They rode by the well. Logan stopped, got off his horse.

He looked inside the well. “Just as I thought,” he said.

“What's that?” Abrams rode up to it.

“One of Wellerman's family is floating in here, not fully changed.”

Abrams sighed. “Let's go. It's a good thing I don't drink nothing but beer and whiskey.”

They rode five miles west of the oasis, through a clamor of dying trees and swampland. They stopped at a hollow where a shack made of various wood and stone was halfway buried under the muddy ground. A slight mist rose as the sun set.

Abrams looked at Logan. “I'm not so sure we should be here.”

“Don’t let your heroic side shine too much, Doc. You people in Bedlam sure are a cowardly group.”

“I don’t think you understand things in Bedlam, Logan. This part of the country is not what folks would call normal – by any means. Nat and me tried to keep you

from seeing such things – the abnormal goings on. We thought you would take care of business and ride out of town.”

“No,” Logan said. “You wanted me out of town in case I turned into a horde and killed one of you. Well, now I'm offering you a chance to remedy the problem, Doc. We're here. Might as well deal with the problem.”

Abrams nodded. “You're right... no turning back now.”

Logan quietly got off his horse. Abrams reluctantly did the same. Logan drew his 'Colt' – checked the chambers.

“What are you doing?” Abrams said. He was spooked, that much could be seen. But there was a dour light above his head he might have thought was a halo.

“I'm making sure I have enough bullets.”

“You're going to kill the witch?”

“If she don't do what I want.” Logan walked past Abrams. He went to the door, looked up. High above them in the sky, a blood-red moon sat amongst the black.

“I can't let you murder somebody – ”

“This is for all of us. One way or another, it's getting resolved. You wanna wait out here, that's up to you.”

Abrams pointed his finger, ready to make his point, when he heard a prairie dog howl. He wiped his chin with his right back hand, thought a moment. He walked briskly to Logan. Abrams nodded. “Alright,” he said.

The door opened by itself. Slowly, the creaking sound made Abrams cringe. Logan walked inside the shack – no fear, or just plain dumb. Abrams couldn't figure that out. Inside were dead animals and their hides hanging. A stench reared its ugly head, made Logan and Abrams gag. A large black cauldron was boiling over. An old woman was stirring it with a gnarly stick. Her hands were fleshless, bone barely gripping that stick. Her elongated face was covered in hard crevices etched under her sunken black eyes. Patches of white straw-like hair pointed upward along her badly-receding hairline. A patchwork, brown woolen blanket sewn together from old mail bags was draped over a frail body.

“I knew you would come one day,” the witch said, continuing to stir her pot.

“Whom do you mean, madam?” Abrams said faintly.

Logan poked Abrams with his elbow. “I'll do the talking,” he whispered.

Abrams winced from the jab.

“Witch,” Logan said. “Listen good. You are to remove whatever curse you have placed on the town of Bedlam, or – ”

“I die.” She finished Logan's sentence for him. “I have had dreams of you two. The dreams always end the same way: you kill me, no matter what.”

“Dreams are funny that way,” Abrams perked up. “Not everything you see in them is relative – ”

“This is not my doing... the horde. It is not so much of a curse... ”

“You’re not making any sense, witch.” Logan cocked his 'Colt'.

The witch laughed. “He came to me, Wellermen. He wanted to be rich and did not care how it came to be. The oasis was given to him by the old ones. There was no

water in that ground, you understand? He was a very stupid man. He cared not of the consequences of his request. He gave his first born... wife... if you remember, Doctor Abrams. That's when the horde first appeared.”

Logan turned to Abrams. “She knows you, huh?”

“When I cared for Wellermen's daughter she was there.”

“It is she who carries the strand... the sickness,” the witch said. “Destroy the sickness... the town will be safe again.”

“She's dead,” Logan said. He moved toward the witch, pointed his 'Colt' at her. “We saw her floating in the well with her Mother.”

“Tell him, Doctor. The little girl is still alive.”

Logan cut his eyes at Abrams. “Tell me, Doc.” He was condescending with a touch of venom.

“I-I don't know what she's talking about.” Abrams barely got the words out.

“You BETTER tell me the truth, Doc. Or I will do something we both will regret.”

Abrams closed his eyes. “You don't understand, Logan.”

“Try me.”

“Yes.” Abrams opened his eyes and tears streamed down his cheeks. “She's alive. I have her in a room above the saloon – wait!”

Logan was already out of the shack and on his horse.

“Logan,” Abrams called after him. Logan was off in the distance, the moon lit the path his horse sped down. “Logan! You can't kill a little girl!”

Abrams stumbled to the witch, fell to his knees. He wept like a baby, keeping his head bowed. He heard a voice inside his head. It was the witch.

“I can make this go away. The pain... guilt.” The witch’s voice was strong, loud in his mind. “You just have to help Mesa enter her Lord's kingdom, bring him presents... souls.”

Abrams heard two gunshots. The voice was gone... out of his head. He heard a loud splash and looked up. Mesa the witch was lying face down in her scalding cauldron. Abrams saw Logan standing where the witch had been. He held his 'Colt' high, smoke trailing from the barrel.

“I think the curse is gone,” Logan said. He holstered his gun, gave Abrams a hard stare.

Abrams steadied himself to his feet. He wiped his eyes with a handkerchief from his breast pocket of his coat. “I thought I saw you get on your horse and leave,” Abrams said coughing.

“I never left this shack, Doc. While she was talking to you her eyes were glowing. I avoided that demon stare. As the two of you were busy I came up behind her.” Logan helped Abrams out of the shack and to his horse.

“What about that little girl..?”

“Doc, that was all a witch-lie. She got you so twisted you don't know what's real and what's not right now. There is no little girl. Remember? We saw Wellermen's wife and child in the well... dead!”

Abrams mounted his horse. He closed his eyes, tried to get himself together. “I failed you,” he said.

TWELVE

Logan got on his horse. “That's the witch talk coming out of you. Get you a few whiskeys, you'll be all right.” He tapped his horse's side with his boots and off he went – like a devil in the night. Abrams followed, but not as fast, riding toward Bedlam.

Nat came out of the saloon. His clothes were shreds. There were bite marks and scratches all over his badly-bruised body. The sun was rising. He was tired, staggering, as he walked to his livery station. Abrams and Logan were just riding in.

Abrams got off his horse and went to Nat. “What in God's name happened to you?” He examined the wounds on Nat, starting with his arms.

Nat spoke slowly, each word took as long as it took for him to blow out air from his nose. “The old woman,” he said. “She changed... jumped me. Just... just as she was about to rip me apart... she up and turned to dust. She... just turned to dust!”

Abrams shot a glance at Logan. Logan led the horses inside the stables. Abrams eased Nat there as well. “I don't think we'll have to worry about any horde in these parts for a while.”

Nat's eyebrows narrowed. “Why?”

“Let's just say it's okay to drink the water in Bedlam.” Logan smiled.

“What about you, Logan? Are you gonna change?”

Abrams sighed. “We'll have to see, Nat. Meantime, let's go over to Damney's – get some breakfast.”

“I'll pass,” Logan said. “I need some rest... Nat, you make sure you get some shut eye. We got a job to do tonight – lot of riding. Later we see that fella, you know, about a stage.”

“I'm hungry,” Nat proclaimed. “I'll be there. Don't think I won't. But right now I do as I want. You hear?”

Logan nodded. “Sorry, Nat. You’re right. Freewill.” Logan laid down on some hay in an empty stable. “Tonight... you do as I say.”

Nat got the stage by himself. He went while Logan was asleep. He felt compelled to keep his distance from the man, even though he had saved his life with those gamblers. Then again, maybe they were even. Nat and Abrams had saved Logan’s life after he'd wandered into town sick from eating that horde.

Night came and they were with the stage outside of Graves’ fortress waiting for Genevieve and her maid. Logan rode his horse a while, sensing the tension from Nat. At the fortress he stayed with the horse, muttering to it, as if it were the only friend he had left.

Nat kept the four horses he'd set up for the stage as quiet as he could. The horses would hear Graves’ men talking on the other side of that gate. A few loud

laughs and hootin' and hollers made the horses neigh – bump into each other. Nat shushed the horses, patted each one on the head.

Suddenly, there was complete silence.

Logan stopped mumbling to his horse. Nat looked around. Logan drew his weapon, looked around also. When there was silence this thick it meant death was around. And then suddenly, without opening the gate, Genevieve and her servant appeared. A glowing, orange light surrounded them. They just walked right through the gate.

Nat took a step back. Logan nearly dropped his 'Colt'.

“What the hell..?” Nat said.

Genevieve was wearing her cloak. As she removed the hood from her head the glowing light disappeared. The servant helped Genevieve to the stage, opening the latch on the door, helping her inside.

Logan rushed over to them. He helped them in to the stagecoach. “How did you get past the guards?” he whispered.

Genevieve smiled. “We put them to sleep.”

“Let's get going,” Nat said, climbing on the stagecoach. “We can talk about this later.”

Logan looked up at Nat, sneered.

“You coming up or what?” Nat demanded.

Logan climbed up, sat next to Nat. Nat shook the reins and took his whip to the front line. The team took off in a dash. The stage rocked a little and trailed.

They were off!

The gate opened slowly. Two men appeared. Lying at their feet were the guards, unconscious.

“There they go, Mr. Graves,” the small shadow said.

A cigar burned bright in the taller shadow's mouth. “This wouldn't have happened if you'd killed Logan like I said too,” Graves said.

“I would have but the Sheriff stopped me!” The smaller shadow kicked dirt.

“Go and get me some men that ain't been touched by Genevieve's hand, and prepare the horses. We ride at sunrise.”

“Why not now?”

“Out in the badlands? At night?” Graves laughed. “Let me do the thinking, all right? We know where they're going. Go ahead... do what I say. Bring a 'Winchester' – several! Everyone gets one.”

THIRTEEN

Sheriff Wilkes sat at his desk drinking coffee, watching the little black ball levitate in the air. Slowly it spun several times, stopped, spun a few more times. Wilkes closed his eyes and listened to the vibrations the black ball made. A low, soft voice sang to him, a message from home – a home no-one in Bedlam knew Wilkes was from. The soft voice was from Lorna, his wife he had become separated from. And there was a boy, Kenada, who had been only six when Wilkes left.

Where Wilkes came from there was a civil war. He was a centurion, and his Hyborian name was Caliek. The black ball was his weapon. Its magic was very powerful. Loyalists to the former regime, Queen Genevieve, attacked a safe house where he had been protecting the golden-eyed ones – twins. The twins were being trained to take over the legion of Swoons, twelve Magi who controlled the city of Hyboria. Wilkes and ten other chosen centurions had fought off as many of the loyalists as they could. One loyalist had miscast a spell, which happens a lot from soldiers as they are all casting spells at the same time during battle. The spell from Wilkes caused the loyalist's heart to explode. The spell the loyalist cast sent Wilkes from Hyboria and landed him out in the badlands.

He walked thirty miles to Bedlam where Doc Abrams nursed his tired, ragged body back to health. Abrams found him passed out on a grave, George Wilkes. Wilkes told him he was a relative visiting the grave when his body gave out on him.

Wilkes eventually settled into town, sleeping wherever he could find shelter. The Town Mayor, Gibbons Hayes, offered Wilkes the job of Sheriff after the last one moved on to the next town. In the payment arrangements, besides twenty-five dollars a month, was a shack behind the hotel that the Mayor owned.

There was the occasional flare up, but mostly Bedlam was a peaceful town – nothing like the civil war-torn streets of Hyboria that Wilkes had once been used to.

Lorna's voice was soft, sweet.

"I miss you," she said. "Kaneda misses you."

"I know." Wilkes sent the message via his mind. He was lost in a trance, the little black ball twisting and turning – helping to carry the message to Lorna's black ball, passing it to her mind. "How are things in the city?"

"Terrible," Lorna said. "Martial law has been announced. The loyalists are invading people's houses – stealing, killing farmers because of a bill passed to grant farmers extra money to keep their farms going. I'm scared. I don't think I can go back to the way things were when the Queen was ruler. I need you here."

"If there was a way… I'm searching for the doorway back home, Lorna. When I find it I'll come back to you and Kaneda."

Wilkes heard silence in his mind. The connection was lost. In Hyboria the

connection would have been stronger. Here, in Bedlam, even the magic from the little black ball was uncertain.

The jail was empty, which for a Saturday night was unusual. It had been quiet around town this past week. The cowhands from the local ranches had been behaving, for once. Just as Wilkes was thinking that, the door to his office flew open.

Doc Abrams appeared in the doorway with Chance Holt. Holt owned a ranch ten miles north of Bedlam. They walked in, eyes coolly focused on Wilkes.

"Where have you been?" Abrams growled.

"I've been here, Doc."

"No, Sheriff. We looked for you." Holt tipped his hat nervously.

"Look." Wilkes stood. He snatched the floating black ball and placed it in his breast pocket. "I'm telling you two I was sitting right here – " He then remembered that whenever he was in conversation with Lorna using the black ball his presence would disappear into a void – so as no-one could disturb him.

Maybe I need to fix that part of the spell a little.

"Okay, okay. What's the trouble, boys?"

"Tell him, Doc." Holt began to pace.

Abrams licked his lips. "She's back."

Wilkes looked bewildered. "What do you mean, "She's back"?

"That thing. That woman who walks bedlam at night and screams – taking any man's life." Abrams wiped spittle from his chin. "You gotta do something. She takes on any girl's looks, walks home with a man. In the street or in a room, she drains the life from him. You can hear her scream from miles away."

"Ben Dooley was her latest victim… a few hours ago," Holt said. "Ben was a damn good foreman, Sheriff. He's the third man from my ranch this month. I can't run a ranch that way – if all my men are dead!"

"Calm down, Holt. We'll get the bottom of this." Wilkes touched Holt's arm. Holt shook his hand free.

"You told me that the last time. Now if you can't fix this, Wilkes, I'll get with the Mayor and we'll find somebody who can." Holt put his finger in Wilkes face.

Wilkes calmly pushed Holt's finger away. "Don't threaten me, Holt. You know you don't have any pull around here. Hell, you're ranch is a part of the cattlemen association in Longley county."

Holt blew heavy air out of his nose and walked out.

"You have to do something," Abrams told Wilkes.

"We will, Doc."

"What's this we?" Abrams eyes bulged out of his head.

"You were the only man not to die from her touch… We might need you as bait. We need to know how or why she spared you. What was it you did that kept her from taking your life source?" Wilkes walked around the desk, thought a few seconds. "Can you remember, Doc? Even a smidgeon?"

Abrams shook his head. "No. I'm blank on that night."

"Let's get Fagan."

“Fagan? I don’t know why – ”

Wilkes put his hand on Abrams shoulder. “Doc, he can dream himself into anyone’s mind, right?”

Abrams nodded.

“Then we’ll have him dream himself up in hers.” Wilkes seemed proud of the plan he’d hatched. He smiled at Doc Abrams.

“I suppose the dream is from me, too? That’s why I’m bait?” Abrams screwed his eyes up, snarled.

“Yep,” Wilkes answered boldly.

“You are a righteous son of a bitch, Sheriff Wilkes,” Abrams said as he walked out of Sheriffs office.

***

Fagan felt a boot swiftly nudge his leg. He was asleep, lying face down in the mud. He stirred slightly, raised his head to see who had intervened in his peaceful slumber. Blurry-eyed he saw Wilkes and Abrams standing over him. Wilkes was smiling, Abrams scowling. Fagan sat up, mud dripping from his face.

“I’m glad you woke me,” he said, spitting out rain water. “It was rather a disgusting dream of Mrs. Salinger and old man Boyd doing it in her parlor. Didn’t know she liked prunes.”

“Come on, Fagan. We have something for you to do.” Wilkes offered a hand. Fagan took it – was barely able to stand.

“I don’t want to dream anymore tonight, fellas. Please… let me find a way to stay up.” Fagan leaned against the wall of the Chinese laundry.

“We need you, Jim,” Abrams said. He sighed, patted Fagan on the shoulder. “If you do this I can find some medicine that might help you stay awake for a few hours more.”

Fagan nodded. “Whose mind do I have to invade?”

“We need to find the screaming woman,” Wilkes said.

“Oh, no way, fellas.” Fagan began to walk away.

Wilkes caught him by the arm. “What are you whining about? All you have to do is dream yourself up in her mind. Doc here is the bait.”

“Maybe he’s right,” Abrams said.

“Not you too, Doc? I can understand a drunk being a coward… you?” Wilkes face showed disappointment, but he knew the right words to get Abrams to do what he wanted.

“Okay! Just shut up Wilkes!” Abrams cried out.

“The last time you had me get in that things mind I couldn’t talk straight for hours. No way!” Fagan said.

“Then I guess I will have to arrest you for murder, and when judge Havers comes to town he will hang you.”

Abrams gasped. “Wilkes… You said you – ”

“I said! He said! You said! Enough talking! Are you helping, or am I throwing you in a cell?” Wilkes stared hard at Fagan until he looked away.

Fagan swallowed hard. “Yeah… I’ll help.”

***

They knew where they had to be – out on North Main Street. That was always where the mysterious woman appeared, or manifested. What had happened to Doc Abrams was he had left Smiley’s with Jeanette. He had too much to drink that night. He and Jeanette staggered down North Main Street, when Jeanette was no longer Jeanette.

As Abrams bent down to kiss Jeanette her eyes became swirling, black voids – her mouth hung open to release the loudest, shrillest scream Abrams had ever heard. Even drunk Doc Abrams tried his best to tear away from the woman, who now had become a faint, ghostly vision in a black dress with a veil covering her bone-white face.

She had her fingernails dug deep in Abram’s arms. She held tight, lowering her face to his as she widened her mouth even more, still screaming just as she was about to drain Doc Abrams life from him.

If it wasn’t for Wilkes doing his nightly walk through the streets, Abrams would have dwindled away to skeletal remains in a suit. She saw Wilkes and vanished when he called Abrams name.

The next time they had Fagan sleep in the troth on North Main Street. Wilkes was caught up in a brawl out in front of Smokey’s and was too late to help catch the mysterious, screaming woman. The remains of a cowhand, just a skeleton, lay in the middle of the street. A skull grinning in anguish.

It was true that Fagan could barely speak after his entry into the screaming woman’s mind. Abrams and Wilkes had to carry him into Smokey’s and pour drinks into him. Abrams pointed out that there had been a white streak through Fagan’s usually dark, curly hair.

Midnight was her hour.

This time, Wilkes was right there, waiting for her, with Fagan in deep sleep, ready to enter the screaming woman’s mind. Abrams was out in the street pacing nervously. Every shadow was alive and malicious. Abrams jumped, swallowed hard. Wilkes was clinging to the side of the livery stable, making sure he wasn’t seen.

Then she appeared.

There was a whisper, or a breath that resembled a breeze. Abrams felt his body go cold, almost limp. Her black eyes swirled and he felt her hypnotic presence come over him. The woman leaned in towards Abrams. She opened her mouth to scream but couldn’t. The swirling darkness in her eyes disappeared. A frantic look replaced it. She opened and closed her mouth. No words came until Fagan walked up to them, lost in a trance.

The woman looked at Abrams. She and Fagan spoke slowly in unison.

“You know him,” they said. “He was my lover… He was to be my only one.”

Abrams regained his sense. What he saw took him by surprise. “What the hell?” He backed away from Fagan and the woman. He turned to run, bumped into Wilkes.

“Damn it, Doc,” Wilkes said through clenched teeth. “Don’t run away! We want to hear what she has to say!” Wilkes pushed Abrams back toward Fagan and the woman. “Go back and talk to her.”

“No! I won’t, are you crazy?” Abrams fumbled with his hands.

‘Come on!” Wilkes grabbed him by his coat's lapels and dragged him back to where the woman and Fagan were frozen like statues, waiting to be addressed again. “Ask her who it is.”

Abrams closed his eyes, reopened them quickly. “Who… ” he began, his voice cracking a bit. He swallowed, started over. “Who is this man I know?”

“Chance Holt,” Fagan and the woman said bursting into tears. “He was an old friend of my Father’s. He sent for me from San Francisco. My Father’s money was dwindling and he wanted me taken care of.” The woman sobbed along with Fagan.

Abrams kept glancing back and forth at Fagan and the woman. “This... this is too weird,” Abrams said.

Fagan and the woman moaned loudly before continuing the story. “I loved him so… He kept me locked away, and would go into jealous tantrums when his workers so much as spoke to me. When I asked him about his carousing he beat me. He threw me in the wagon and drove me to the outskirts of the town, just on the border of the badlands. I awake every night here, looking for him.” Fagan and the woman spoke in an angry voice. “I need to speak to him. Can you take me to Chance Holt?”

“Doc… that was her. The body we found right here on North Main Street last year.”

Abrams looked over at Wilkes.

“Tell her yes, Doc. Go on, do it.” Wilkes slapped Abrams on the arm.

“All right already. I’m doing it.” Abrams cleared his throat. “We – I can take you to Chance Holt. Will you be at rest afterward?”

Fagan and the woman reared their heads and let out the most horrible, ear-piercing scream anyone had ever heard.

Wilkes and Abrams touched their ears.

“I guess I got my answer,” Abrams said.

***

They took Abrams wagon to Holt’s ranch. The three of them waited in the wagon whilst the screaming woman entered Holt’s house without using a door. They’d caught him at the right time. He was alone. Since it was Saturday, all of his cowhands were in town having a good time. Holt was in his office, counting his money, enjoying a cigar.

The woman appeared, her cold hands upon Holt’s shoulders.

They heard Holt scream.

Fagan screeched along with the echo of her scream.

Wilkes and Abrams rushed inside the house. There on the floor next to the table lay Holt – nothing but bones in a suit. The screaming woman was nowhere to be found.

“Do you think we did the right thing?” Abrams asked.

Wilkes answered after a brief thought. “We had to protect the townspeople, Doc. It’s what I was hired to do.”

FORTEEN

“What's wrong, Nat?” Logan asked after he checked behind them, looking for riders on the trail.

“Nothing's wrong,” Nat said. He flung his whip, caught the lead again. The horses bared down harder, dust kicking behind them. The moon was higher and brighter, the trail out in the badlands became even longer, as they left the woods behind them. “Do you know where we're going? Where does the line stop?”

Logan sighed, laid the rifle between himself and Nat. “She just said we would know where to stop when we got there.”

“Damn it!” Nat shook his head. “You get me in on your job, dangerous enough, don't know the end of the job.”

“You can always stop the stage. I'll let you have my horse, go back to Bedlam... if you’re scared.”

Nat snarled at Logan, called out to the horses. “Never said I was scared. Never said such.”

“Then stop you’re whining and finish the job. I'm closing my eyes. Wake me if there's trouble.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Nat said sarcastically. “I can do the job, boss... I can do it quietly, too.”

“Then do just that, tenderfoot – quietly!” Logan pushed his hat down over his eyes – leaned back on a sack containing flower and coffee.

Nat looked at Logan and muttered an insult under his breath.

It was close to sunrise when it was thought better to take a break. Soon, no bend from a river would exist in the badland – nothing but soil. For now, Genevieve and her servant could bathe – and the horses could vitalize their bodies through drink. Nat and Logan make camp. All could rest for a while. Later, food would be cooked: some bacon, some beans.

Genevieve had her bath. She dressed inside the stage. Logan had started the fire early. He was hungry and wanted coffee.

She came round to help. At first he wasn't up for conversation. The tension between him and Nat was much too visible to Genevieve. When she mentioned it he just gave her a dirty look.

“I assume that's a taboo subject,” she said, tending to the bacon on the open fire.

Logan just shook his head. There was a short silence. He decided to be fair with her. After all, she was both his employer and package to be delivered.

“How did you get by those guards?” He sat beside her on a log.

“As I said, we put them to sleep.” She smiled at him. It was a beautiful smile – the kind of smile you notice on your love's face on a spring day, or the smile on a

child at their first astonishment.

“You put something in their tea.”

“No.” Genevieve laughed. “My servant bowed her head and mustered enough energy to put six men in slumber.”

“No.” Logan snorted through his nose. Not one of his qualities he liked – to let folks see him laughing. “You’re joshing.”

Genevieve said nothing. Logan's face changed. The smile disappeared.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

Genevieve shrugged. “I suppose I can tell you, now that we're away from prying eyes and walls with ears.” She took the skillet from the fire, rolled a few strips of bacon on a plate. She loaded the skillet with more bacon before saying, “You won’t believe this”!

“Try me.”

“We are going to travel the distance of these badlands. You understand,” she said. Logan nodded. He was deep into her words. “When we reach the end there will be a sphere of light – ”

“A what of light?”

“A ball... of light.”

“Oh. Why a ball?”

“Mr. Logan, please.”

“I'm sorry. Go on.”

“We shall have to enter that... ball of light. Inside, there is a city – a great metropolis. Hyderia it is called – a beautiful city with very tall buildings and majestic streets. Its people, although simple, could almost be considered barbaric compared to here. They are mostly good, but they are being ruled by evil – an evil that ousted me from my homeland to usurper my rule. His name is Moorcock.”

“And how in God's name did he do this, this evil Moorcock?”

“I am being held by a spell he cast upon me. If ever, before five years, I am to return to Hyderia I shall wither away. The wind will carry my dust to the three hells under our great city. The spell ended last year. Every time I have run away from Graves he has caught me, my servant punished in the cruelest ways... My guides have always died violent deaths.

“I needed someone just as violent as he... more cunning.”

Logan considered. He took his hat off, looked up at the sun that was scarring the sky. “Violent, you say? Cunning? Maybe, maybe not. One thing is certain, if I'm gonna die I'm taking as many with me as I can. I'm gonna get some rest. I suggest you do the same, Mrs. Graves.”

“Please, Mr. Logan. That is no longer my name. Genevieve will do.”

“Your majesty? Perhaps? I see... I will not make light of your situation, Ma’am. Get some rest, Genevieve.”

“Do you like working for Mrs. Graves?” Nat said to Nadia. She shrugged as she washed the dishes in the river. “You don't say much.”

“I don't have much to say,” she said. She wiped a plate with a worn-out piece of

cloth.

“You been with her long?”

“You ask too many questions.” The servant girl made a face.

“What's wrong with that? Asking is the only way to get answers to the truth.”

“The truth is not always an easy pill to swallow.”

“You should rest.” Nat smiled.

“I rest when Mrs. Graves says to rest.”

“Yeah? I do what I want.”

“Even when Mr. Logan tells you what to do?”

“He ain't my boss!” Nat had a sour look on his face. “Nobody tells me what to do.”

“I believe you... I'm not sure if you believe it.”

Nat nodded – backed away from the servant girl. He saw Logan sleeping beside the stage, his head resting on his saddle and his hat pulled over his eyes. A tree shaded his body. His horse was close by eating grass. Nat watched him a few seconds longer.

“Some friend you turned out to be,” he whispered to himself.

Out in the distance a blurry vision of a man staggered across the badlands towards them, weary, frail, dressed in all black. Nat watched this man as he drew closer. His clothes were tattered, dirty.

“What the hell?” Nat said. He rushed to Logan, shook him awake. “Hey! Somebody's coming yonder.”

“What are you like, Nat. Are you going out of your mind? Nobody is going to be walking through these badlands.” Logan sat up, rubbed his eyes.

“Then what's that?” Nat pointed.

Logan looked behind him, his mouth agape. “ Wh... in tarnation is going on?” He got to his feet, found his gun belt hanging from a limb. “That fool's got some explaining to do.” Logan strapped the gun belt on, waited confidently for the stranger to get closer.

“You think he's working for Graves?”

“I don't know, Nat. Maybe. Go warn Genevieve and her servant. Let them know everything is all right.”

“Sure thing, Logan.”

The stranger stumbled toward the stage, barely keeping his balance. He'd been out in the hot sun, but his skin was bone-white. His eyes were big, bulging under the eyelids, veins straining in the bloodshot eye sockets. His broken, chapped lips were moving and the words he spoke to himself unintelligible.

Logan cocked the hammer of his 'Colt'. He pointed it at the stranger. “That's far enough mister,” he said.

Logan's voice seemed to bring the man out of his daydream. The stranger laughed, tried hard to stand still. “I-uh-wish no one any harm my good man.” He ran a hand through his stone-white hair. “I'm only passing through this great land of yours.”

“What business do you have out here?” Logan's voice created a loud echo across the silent badlands.

Genevieve and Nadia watched the situation from inside the stage. Nat had the rifle. He stayed near the hitch of the stage. Nervously, he steadied the rifle on the stranger best he could.

“My name is Glynnis... Lafferty, as I said – ”

“You scouting for Graves?”

“I'm afraid I don't know a Mr. Graves. Would it be possible for me to fill my canteen?” Glynnis pulled out an imaginary canteen, showed it to Logan.

Logan sighed, put his pistol away. He nodded. “If you'd like, Mr. Glynnis. Sorry about the questions and such.”

“No offense taken.” Glynnis ran to the river bend, threw himself into it, laughing the whole trip.

Logan went over to the stage. He wiped sweat from his brow with a hand. Nat came over, still watching Glynnis.

“Who is he?” Nat said with urgency.

“You can put that down, Nat. I believe he's harmless.” Logan then turned to Genevieve. “He's not with Graves. He's not with anyone, nor of sound mind.”

“But you don't know he's not dangerous,” Genevieve said. She opened the door of the stage, waited for her servant to follow and shut it tight.

“No ma'am. I think he's a lost soul.” Logan fiddled with his gun, removing it and placing it back in the holster.

“Where in God's name did he come from?” Nat shook his head, listened to Gynnis having a grand old time in the river.

“We should stay away from him. He has to move on. No stragglers,” Genevieve said.

“What if he has nowhere else to go?” Logan leaned in toward her. “We can't leave him out here. He'll die.”

“He's come this far. He'll be alright.” Genevieve moved from Logan’s presence. She walked past him then stopped, turned around. “He cannot enter the city with us. That's all there is to it. Remember, I'm paying you.” Genevieve motioned for her servant to follow her. They went on to Glynnis.

Nat stared at Logan then back to Genevieve. “What's come over her?”

“I don't know,” Logan said. “I really don't.”

“Sir?” Genevieve called to Glynnis twice before he noticed her.

He stopped flapping his arms in the river, nodded to her.

“Ma'am. Beg your forgiveness. I'm a bit too happy to find water.”

“I see that. I'm sure I would react the same way if I were without water. By the way, how long have you been out here?”

Glynnis swam to ground, climbed out of the river bend. He stood up, his clothes dripping puddles underneath him. “It seems like... forever.”

“Mm. Well, do you know where you are headed?”

“Yes, Ma'am. The first reasonable town or village I come to.”

“I see. Well, we wondering if you'd like to sit and eat with us?”

A slow smile crossed Glynnis' face. “Yes ma'am... I surely would. It's been awhile since I've eaten.”

“Come with us, you poor dear. Let the sun dry your clothes and have a bite,” Genevieve said, taking Glynnis by the arm.

The sky began to darken later that evening. The sun chose to slip into a short slumber. Nat and the servant girl were loading supplies back in the stage. During the meal, Genevieve never brought up leaving Glynnis. Logan waited but the subject never came up – even when he prodded her to the conversation.

Glynnis sat there watching Nat and the servant. Genevieve left the camp for the stage, looked back at him – maybe a final goodbye.

There was a sound in trees surrounding them. A low, hissing sound. The servant girl screamed. She saw the demon there, looking over a limb. Logan ran to the trees, his weapon drawn.

“Show yourself!” he demanded. Behind him, Logan could feel Nat not far. He heard Nat cock the rifle. “Come out from behind them trees tin horn!”

The demon hissed, gurgled, as it came from behind the tree – even giggled. “No reason for guns, gentlemen.” It was a type of demon called a Drago.

“What is that thing?” Genevieve put her hands to her mouth. Her servant grabbed Genevieve by the arm and pushed her into the stage.

“Nothing if it's not hell spawn.” Nat fumbled his words. He tried to control his hands, keep the rifle still.

“I only want him... nothing more.” The Drago bowed, pointing.

Logan and Nat realized whom the demon was pointing at. Glynnis stood in that same line of sight, the exact same spot, his eyes stuck on the demon, mouth trembling.

“And if we don't give him to you?” Logan asked.

“No!” The Drago hissed. “You must... you have to. I have been tracking this soul for years!”

“Glynnis?” Logan called out.

“Yes, Mr. Logan?”

“What happens if you don't go with this thing?”

“I – I don’t really know – ”

“What did he do to warrant you putting him in Hell?”

The Drago smiled. “You really need to know? Well... this man... Glynnis-James-Glynnis came to the fine state of Virginia looking for a friend he had served jail time with in Pennsylvania. This friend had told him of the family he married into, including details of their wealthy shipping business. But the father-in-law hated him – was bound to cut him out of the wealth – so he and Glynnis here cooked up a plan. Glynnis got out of jail three weeks after his friend and came to the big house in Hampton. Only, Glynnis was supposed to kill the old man. He ended up killing everyone in the house... including his friend. Not able to live with what he'd done, Glynnis hung himself in his jail cell. And somehow since, he convinced one of my

underlings to open up a crack in Hell so he could escape... and here we stand."

"Is all that true, Glynnis?" Logan looked over his shoulder at Glynnis.

Still in the same spot, eyes glued to the demon, tears ran down his cheeks.

"I'll take that as a yes," Logan said. "Run Glynnis!" Logan screamed.

Logan fired once. The bullet struck the Drago in the forehead. Blood dribbled from the half-dollar sized wound. It withdrew, hands curled, mouth slack-jawed. A high pitch scream came from its black and blue lips.

Glynnis was already a blurry figure in the distance out on the badlands.

"I'll come for you." The Drago pointed a gnarly finger at Logan. "After I catch him." The wind picked up dust which then swirled around the demon. Once it settled, the demon was gone.

Logan staggered backwards a bit. He looked on at the trees in disbelief. Nat came up behind, sighed. Logan turned to him.

"Why'd you do it? Couldn't we have just given him up?" Nat said.

"Yeah," Logan said. "I could have. But, I think everybody needs a head start in a chase."

"We should get going," Genevieve said from the stage. "It's nearing sunset."

"She's right." Nat put his hand on Logan's shoulder. Logan looked at him strangely. He said nothing, accepted that hand as a notion there friendship had been patched up.

"Let's get this over with." Logan moved toward the stage. "The sooner, the better."

Nat climbed on top of the stage, offered a hand for Logan to climb up. Logan accepted without hesitation.

"No more adventures with you after this, Logan. " Nat smiled at him. "It's too tiring."

For most of the night the ride west was uneventful. Logan couldn't help but feel this job was a mistake. And what he had done hours earlier, with Glynnis and the demon, was not the ace card he would have liked to have pulled from his sleeve. He wanted to convey this to Nat, but that too felt awkward.

Nat talked a lot that night – different from the last few on the stage. Logan wasn't listening. He was thinking, thinking – perhaps too much.

Ever since coming to Bedlam, too much had happened that confused him. He could only react to them, not make the situation out in his favor.

Something deep stirred inside Logan. He didn't feel himself body-wise, or in his head – a weakness he couldn't let anyone see, Graves included.

The sun began to show through a patch of early morning twilight. A yellow, bright light shining out from the gray. The badlands were disappearing. It felt like they had arrived at the edge of the world. Faintly, a sphere appeared. Just as the gray was leaving, the bright light coming, a clear ball rested on the badlands, touching the sky. It was huge! And inside were distorted images of a city hustling and bustling, people coming and going.

The stagecoach carrying Genevieve Graves and her Servant Nadia came riding

up on the horizon hard and fast. Beside them was Logan. His horse's legs were a blur in the dust they kicked up.

And out of nowhere came hundreds of flying creatures, circling them. Logan's horse rose up and neighed. The small humans with wings attacked: biting, scratching with claws. Their screams sounded like a high-pitched song.

“What the hell are these things?” Logan screamed. He tried to bat them down with his gun. Some he came into contact with swiftly, but they kept coming.

Some even made it into the coach. Nadia created a small bubble, imprisoning several and sending the bubble flying toward the rising sun.

“They are harpies, Mr. Logan,” Genevieve called out. “They're protecting the city of Hydria.”

“They're a damned nuisance!” He kept swatting them down like flies.

A darkness came over them. The harpies dispersed. A thousand little dots flew across the sky and disappeared. Genevieve had become frozen, her face showed terrible pain. Her hands were entangled with each other. Nadia took hold of her Queen and comforted her.

“What the hell is going on?” Logan screamed.

Nat just pointed, stuttered. “Look!” His face went white.

Then Logan heard a clicking noise and he knew a gun was pointed at his head. He turned slowly and saw a man had the reins of his horse in one hand, a 'Colt' in the other. Behind the man were at least fifty plus men on horses with guns pointed at everyone. To the left of the men stood Graves.

He was sneering, his arms folded.

“I’m not even going to negotiate with you,” Graves said. “You, the servant girl, and your crony there are in fact going to die. But I am willing to let you make peace with your maker. That does not include groveling of any kind, or begging for your life – backstabbing each other. You have five minutes for any prayer of any kind.”

Logan laughed. “You are long-winded.” Logan sniffed the air. “Something smells like its burning. I can tell you one thing. If I can walk into your compound and take your woman without spilling blood, I think I can get us safely past you and where we need to go… probably not without spilling blood. Damn! What the hell is burning?”

The sky was on fire. Clouds became balls of blazing flame, momentarily causing the air in the badlands to become unbearable to breathe. Logan nearly dropped to his knees but managed to hold on. Through blurred vision he saw Graves men fall out. Nat struggled to stay conscious.

Strange. The immense heat didn’t bother Nadia and Genevieve, or Graves for that matter.

Graves took from his belt what looked like half an amulet that was glowing with a soft hue that bled into his hand.

The balls of fire broke apart, gave way to an invisible rain. The air became breathable again. Logan regained his vision just as everyone afflicted resumed their part in the drama. Graves’ men had put away their guns. They were in a trance,

hunched forward, stuck in an attack stance.

A swirling, clear bubble appeared in the sky and drifted down, hovering just above Graves. A man in a white tunic resided inside this bubble. He sat in a lotus position, his hands folded in his lap. His ashen face wore a sick smile. Thin long strands hung just below his ears, flowed in and out for lack of gravity inside the bubble.

“Who the hell is this?” Logan shouted to Genevieve. He glanced at her twice before noticing she had the other half of the glowing amulet in her hands. Logan angrily took a few steps to the stagecoach. Nat joined him, nervously looking over his shoulder.

“Graves’ men look like they are ready for some sort of battle. But they ain’t moved once since that came.” Nat pointed to the bubble.

“This situation is getting stranger by the minute, Nat. She’s not telling us everything,” Logan said as they stood by the coach window. Logan leaned in, “are you, Mrs. Graves.”

“I’ve told you what you needed to know. Which is more than I should have.” Genevieve retorted. “You have no idea what powers you are dealing with.”

Logan laughed. “I know that you better fess up woman. Or I’ll put a bullet in your pretty little head.”

“I’m not the enemy, Mr. Logan.” Genevieve showed him the half of the amulet. “I need the other half to enter my world, claim my right.”

“Who is he?” Logan pointed at the bubble.

Genevieve sighed. “Morecock, of course.”

“Who is this Morecock?” Nat looked bewildered. Logan shot him a glance that he was on his last nerve. “Well hell!” Nat protested. “I have a right to know who we’re against.”

“He’s here to prevent us from entering Hyderia.” Nadia said, “the other world I told you we were from.”

“How long till your world opens up?” Logan asked.

“It will not make itself visible until I have the other half.”

“Is that all we gotta do?” Nat grabbed his rifle from the carriage seat. “Let’s end this, Logan. I’m getting homesick. I’m gonna bust his bubble.” Nat aimed his 'Winchester' at the bubble.

“Nat! No!” Logan screamed, and pushed Nat’s arm just as he got a shot off. The bullet traveled the speed of light and hit the bubble. It bounced off and ground just in front of the lead horse, causing the wagon to move slightly. The horse whinnied, jumped forward. Logan grabbed the horse with his hands, spoke softly in its ear. When the horse was calmed he turned to Nat, fists balled up, ready to strike.

Nat approached Logan, nostrils flared, ready to bawl him out when they were interrupted by strange growling. Nat looked over his shoulder and immediately dropped his 'Winchester'. “Logan, Logan,” he blubbered, nervously pointing.

Logan’s eyes followed Nat’s finger. He gasped. “Damn it to hell,” he whispered.

Graves' men were not men anymore. During the brief meeting with Genevieve and Nat's silly debacle they had transformed into gruesome horde. Twenty snarling, growling hordes were all lined up to tear everyone apart.

In an instant the first three jumped at Logan. He drew his gun quick. The first bullet ripped through the horde's left eye. It fell just short of Logan who took a few steps to the right to avoid the second. Logan fired his 'Colt' again and blew the top of the horde's head. The third had already grabbed hold of Logan by the cuff of his shirt. Its fangs were deeply embedded in his wrist.

Logan screamed out in pain, fell to his knees. He pulled his arm from the Horde's fangs, tearing the skin like peeling bark from a dead tree. Blood ran down his arm and gun hand forming a puddle of red on the barren ground.

Nat stepped forward. With a single shot from his 'Winchester' the horde dropped like a sack of potatoes. He rushed over to Logan and helped him to his feet. Logan threw his arm over Nat's shoulder, began to walk with him when he felt strange.

Logan closed his eyes. There was a fierce pain throbbing in the center of his mind. He heard two voices whispering. Logan cried out, dropped his 'Colt'. He clasped both ears with his hands. His body temperature rose to an unspeakable and dangerous high. Beads of sweat fell from his ashen face like raindrops. The voices became louder as they eventually fell in sync. His eyes had turned a golden yellow. He fell on all fours, lifted his head straight up in the air and cried out again. His face contorted, nose and mouth grew into a snarling snout – large upper tusks extending from his top lip. Hair covered his changing body, which had already removed itself from Logan's now torn and tattered clothing. His ears grew, became more flat, inches taller than his head. His hands, feet were now like a boars with claws.

Nat looked at the coach. He saw Genevieve and Nadia had their heads bowed, lips moving silently. "What are you two doing to him?!" he screamed at them. He started to rush the coach, but his attention turned to the two hordes running toward him. He aimed his 'Winchester' and fired. The horde leapt at him and caught the bullet in its chest, falling to the ground tripping the next one. It too fell. It struggled to gather itself and ran to Nat. He fired again. The bullet pierced the horde between the eyes.

The voices, intertwined, grew louder. The transformation was complete. Logan was now a horde, and the voices were directing his attacks.

Three more of Graves' hordes had found their way to the coach. The horses were being attacked, one already fallen, being ripped apart by a horde. The other two were on either side of the coach, shaking it. Logan rushed them, taking the one horde on the left first. They tumbled over and over, biting, growling, clawing at each other until Logan had the horde pinned down by its neck. He ripped into its throat, spat out the deep red blood.

Logan pushed the dead horde out of his way, trotted over to the other hordes tormenting the horses. Nat cut the reins and the lines. The middle horse trampled a horde underfoot. All four hooves trekked across its head, leaving it to bleed to death. Logan was in a wrestling match with another horde, claws slicing each other on the

face and chest. A gun fired and the horde fell dead at Logan's feet.

Nat was holding his revolver, grimacing.

Logan snarled, gave Nat a glimpse of his understanding to what just happened then carried on by running headlong into a group of ten hordes! There was the flutter of a thousand little wings at his ears. Logan stopped in his tracks – watched the harpies attack the rest of the horde.

Logan saw that Graves was vulnerable. He was trying to fend off harpies, shooting wildly, bullets zipping by their tiny wings. They would attack in packs of ten, biting and scratching Graves. The harpies lifted the other half of the Amulet from Graves' neck He screamed, fired until his gun was empty. Graves fell to his knees, awaiting the inevitable.

A stream of blue lightning descended from the sky and eradicated Graves, leaving him as nothing but a pile of dust that was carried away by a gentle wind.

Two harpies dragged the half of the amulet across the air and dropped it in Genevieve's lap. She touched it and a bright white light consumed her. Nadia screamed as she was enveloped by the great light. Nadia and Genevieve became one again, a whole being, as they were always meant to be. Nat stood back from the stage – felt the heat on his face from the glowing aura of energy.

The stagecoach fell apart and the light emerged, floated high in the sky at an accelerated rate. The light illuminated the sky, blinding all whom were watching it ascend. The bubble melted away and the man who had been inside fell to the ground, trying to save his last breath.

Nat saw Logan passed out on the ground. No longer a horde, he was bruised, wounded and completely naked.

"Logan?" Nat touched his back. He took the covering from the stage, wrapped it around Logan. "Doc's gonna be mad at you," Nat said, helping Logan into the last remains of the stage – which was a bare thread wagon. "This time you're gonna have to pay him for his doctoring."

FIFTEEN

Nat awoke with the sound of the church bells ringing in his ears. He sat up in his bed, slow and groggy. He looked over to the other cot which Doc used for patients. The cot was empty. Nat jumped out of bed and looked out of the window. He didn't see Logan's horse.

Nat found his clothes on the floor, dressed as fast as he could. He didn't like the idea that Logan had left without saying goodbye. He was going to ride out after him and give him a piece of his mind.

No son of a bitch treats Nat that way. After everything I've done for him.

Nat saw it sitting on Doc's dresser – the silver dollar with the bullet hole. A note was under it:

Take care, Nat

If I need a partner again, I'll send word for you.

Nat felt this sinking feeling in his stomach. He didn't know if it was because Logan was gone and he may never see him ever again, or the fact he found the man who had killed his father. Nat put the silver dollar in his pocket, put his hat on.

Either way, Nat thought. *The stables wont keep.*

TRIBAL DEATH

By

Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

When the plunger depressed, a rocky landscape turned to dust. Another toxic cloud had exploded over the heads of two desperate cowboys and encircled them.

“You’ll never find it,” old man Graves laughed from beneath the yellow mist. “Hell, legend goes that old Pete Morgan was so tight and suspicious with his gold that he dang near convinced himself he didn’t know where it was, just so he wouldn’t steal it.”

“You’re a funny old man,” Taylor scoffed as he wiped the rock particles from his Stetson cowhide hat.

The decrepit figure of his father, John Graves, continued to goad him. “If you find that gold, you’ll be able to buy a proper lined Stetson or a real ten gallon. Shame you won’t.”

Grumbling under his breath, Taylor lashed out, squatting flies from around his food infested beard and shaking out the contents all over the grainy sandstone floor. “I’m gonna find it, Pa, so you need to just quit on busting my hide about it,” he stated defiantly.

John laughed, holding the sides of his bumptious stomach wrapped up in a thick grey shirt that had long since been overdue for its annual limestone scrub. “You took eight men out to Virginia town, you remember, don’t you son?” he sniggered from a rock where he had perched, like a vulture to Taylor’s dreams that continued to peck at the corpse. “You boys had that town cleared out by the end of that very same day, people runnin around screamin’.”

“That’s enough, Pa.” Taylor insisted, turning to his father with an ever tightening lasso rope clenched in his hand.

John spied the length, looking unthreatened by it.

“Now come on, boy, you know this one and it’s just starting to get warm, just lit the fire where cooking this chestnut’s concerned. Let’s see now,” he continued. “All those people were railroaded from their homes and businesses on account of that old map you bought for beaver hides.”

“Drop it, Pa!” shouted his irate son, noose folded over in anticipation.

“But let’s just finish this one, Taylor, a man’s in the middle of a story here. You dig up the whole town and blow up all the bars and funeral parlours to find the map wasn’t real, didn’t ya? You never even bothered to check it with someone and then the sheriff came back with a posse of thirty armed men that same afternoon.”

“It was fifty,” Taylor fumed.

John stood corrected. “That’s right, fifty men and they damn near wiped out your whole posse in, what ten minutes?”

“Yeah, about that,” Taylor admitted, edging closer to his petulant parent. “I couldn’t risk showing the map to anyone, could I?”

Standing in front of his father, now in rapturous howls of laughter, Taylor threw the rope around John’s chubby neck and pulled it tight.

“Had enough of you making fun of me, Pa!” he said, veins sticking up around his burning neck. “Too hot to be putting up with your laughing commentary of my hard gettins’.”

“Do you see a tree round here that you can hang that end on, boy?” John asked, pointing to the other side of the rope. Removing the noose, he jumped down and put his back hand clean across Taylor’s jaw, almost knocking him to the floor. Taylor had always seemed surprised when his five foot nothing dad would reach up and give him the soft side of a reversed palm that only knew tough justice.

“Stop being an idiot, Taylor and I’ll be glad to stop treatin you like one! Anyway, why didn’t you ask that Indian, Chief whatever his name was; the one that Old Pete used to hang out with?”

“He’s dead, that’s why!” Taylor shrieked with impatience. “No use me asking a dead man six foot under hot coals anything, is there?”

“What?” John asked, bewildered. Then he remembered. “The head of the Sioux tribe had given the railroad company some troubles when they came to build their track through his land, so after he passed away, Old man Cartwright, the steam tycoon, decided to give the chief a cremation send off in the front shovelled boiler of his new steam locomotive.” John paused to reminisce on the details. “Damn Indians chased that train for nigh on three days before they gave up trying to get his remains back. Horse can’t run faster than a train.”

Taylor’s mood immediately lightened as they both fell on the floor, laughing.

“That’s the best damn story I ever did hear!” cried old man Graves. His eyes welled up with tears of laughter and mite allergies and his britches nearly fell from his vibrating stomach.

Taylor tried to recover, but the image of all those Indians shooting arrows at a rail car had him gripping his insides on the outside to keep them secure.

“They thought a great metal spirit had him!” Taylor whined uncontrollably, whilst John managed to regain his footing.

“We better get up. Anyone sees us, they’d think were on the cactus juice.”

Wiping his face free of weed and stone, John looked over to the hole his son had diligently blown. The cloud of mineral vapours had begun to evaporate and revealed a cave entrance with a wooden board tied into the granite face.

Taylor rolled over to see the vision. He slowly clambered to his feet, eyes refusing to leave the scene in case it proved to be a mirage. Had he found it? After all these years, was this the final resting place of Old Pete himself, complete with a federal reserves’ missing deficit?

Looking over to his son, John asked: “Why did you decide to look here?”

Taylor tore his wide eyed pupils from the opening he had so proudly blown.

“I just thought I’d try random places on Pete’s riding trial,” he smugly replied. “If he was in a hurry, I thought he might have asked the Indians to bury him where they knew he’d stashed the bullion on his way through.”

“What makes you think the Indians buried him with it, that they didn’t take it for themselves?”

Taylor rubbed his discoloured beard, considering the moot point. “I’ve thought about that for a long time,” he confessed, “but he trusted them, so I have to as well.”

Stepping up to the unstable opening, the junior Graves boy waved his Pa to stay back from the falling pieces of fragmented rock still tumbling down the mausoleum’s opening.

John edged forward a little more, un-noticed by Taylor’s eagerness to wipe clean the recovered sign. In the darkness of the cave, its painted letters remained a dripped florescent red, as if just poured from the can.

“Can you read what it says?” John enthused quietly, so as not to bring down more debris, or more importantly be overheard by any passing travellers with similar ideas on early retirement. They were in the middle of nowhere, a new frontier state was slowly emerging, but they had overheard less amusing stories than the train chase about certain Indian tribes in the vicinity. From time to time, at the saloons and bars they frequented whilst on the run, a new, terrifying tale would crop up from an out west prospector or rancher. It had been imparted to them one evening by a very drunk judge, fortunately, that the desperate remains of homeless tribal factions, bent on revenge against the white settlers for removing them from their lands and slaughtering their people, stalked the plains at night. Shadows that by any campfire would be deemed illusion were in fact the patient ghosts of a lost generation, knives in hand, ready to scalp the unwary in their sleep. John tried not to think on such things: drunken stories from fantasists who heard too much and believed it all. Even so, since out so far from home, he always kept his Smith & Wesson top break pistol handy. It had become a bit worn around the handles from a fair few uncivil disputes over the years, but made him feel as comfortable as a rattlesnake in a watering hole just to know it was close by.

“I think I can make out something here!” Taylor unnecessarily shouted over to his Pa, now just feet away.

Wiping the sweat from his sticky brow with his father’s dirty polka dotted handkerchief, Taylor began to read aloud the writings of an enigma.

You found the place whence I fell
A tribal haunt will keep me well
Those that try to steal my bills
From golden bone will know my ills

“Was he drunk, do ya think?” John supposed.

Taylor had been tracking Pete's footsteps around the plains ten times over for the best part of twenty years, between heists of his own. Pete knew what he was talking about. Trouble was; they didn't.

A fly landed on Taylor's arm as he just stood there thinking. He squatted it firmly, then another came. *Damn sun!* he supposed. There were more, ten flying insects; no twenty, fifty, even. They drew his attention to the terrible smell further in. Taylor detached the connector wires from his detonator with a swift pull of the cord and wound them around his right shoulder as he peered into the darkness.

"I'm going to check out the cave."

John beat the flying vermin from his clothes. "Go get that gold, son!" he encouraged.

"I'll keep watch and if anyone comes this way I'll introduce them to Miss Misery here!" he gloated, removing his piece and inserting fresh shells. It snapped open hurriedly, like a jimmied bolt on a locked whorehouse door. It was almost silent from each individual worn piece inside that no longer fitted together properly and slimy from the therapeutic oiling ritual he would carry out whilst sitting in his favourite chair back home. He had only left the comfort of his farm to help Taylor find that damn gold. The invention of the infernal telegraph machine had given him all the details. Without it, he would have just had to wait for his boy to return with the loot. He feared however, the money may not be reparation enough for the life they had been forced to endure since seeking the fortune. And they called these machines progress.

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The bright yellow glow of an unrelenting sun moved silently across the skyline, signalling the drawing down of their light, but there was still no Taylor to be seen. The boy had been in the cave almost an hour. After impatiently waiting, John followed his son's tracks into the eerie cavern with the help of a kerosene lamp. He swung the artificial beam down on his feet so that he could avoid tripping up and falling on the jagged shards of sediment and then swung it forward in hopes of catching a glimpse of his overdue partner, or at least his killer. John squeezed his Smith saviour closer than ever as the infestation of flies became denser the further down he travelled. That was it! Underfoot, it felt like he was walking at an angle, downward somehow. Adjusting the fuel flow to his burning glass torch, he spied his wayward boy lying on the ground. He ran over and put a hand on his still chest. His heart was still beating furiously.

Taylor's eyes sprang open.

"What's the matter Pa, did you think I'd bought it? Big scorpion had eaten me and was sitting on our dollars, waiting for them to hatch?"

"You sure a bullet didn't pass through that idiot brain of yours at Virginia town, because if it didn't, I'd be mighty happy to oblige," John frowned, helping Taylor up to his feet as he began to recite the words he had seen at the entrance, like a child

would recite a nursery rhyme to remember it.

“I’m still wondering what the riddle meant,” he informed his Pa, in between repetitive tones, so as not to seem crazy. More flies were gathering around them in greater numbers. “Think we’re going to find a pretty rancid body further in.”

“And I don’t appreciate it too much, to be reminded of mortality at my age.”

As they moved along the expanding path, they reached an alcove of bodies from which erupted a cloud of black insects. The bones of a hundred red warriors, their wasting flesh piled high around the chamber, blocked their way.

“It’s a God damn slaughter house in here, Taylor!”

John held his nose tight.

“The devil’s deeds hidden deep under the ground, away from the eyes of man.”

“Stop the Bible chatter, Pa, you know you only went to church on account of Ma when she was alive,” Taylor reminded him.

“Ain’t no forgiveness for what we’ve done in our lives. Have to find our own peace, so if the devil’s amongst us. We’ll have to remind him that he owes us a few drinks for the lives we’ve taken.”

John became indignant. He’d gone to church each and every Sunday up until the Lord saw fit to take Lynette from his side. After that he just couldn’t bring himself to sit next to her empty chair. It wouldn’t have seemed right without her pink cheeks glowing beneath that bonnet of hers, clutching the good book like a boat for fear of sinking. He’d felt cheated of her company so young, that smile to tell him he was worth a damn. Taylor was only small, a child at the time and John had to try and turn all that anger of his around on his own. He had tried to give him a purpose, to give him something to hope for. Soon enough though he was running out of school and learning to ride with a posse of kids he had fashioned from those dumb enough to follow him. His first bank job the teller had supposed was a joke, a prank being played on him by his humorous manager. Who would have expected a twelve year old boy to rob a bank after all? That’s the day his best friend was killed, little Shaun Woods. They didn’t know the cashier had a 'Winchester' hidden discreetly under the counter, standing by to defend himself, so when the shells began to fly; he had no choice but to use it. Shaun’s father, the town undertaker, through stone masonry had given his son the very best headstone mortal hands could carve. Taylor’s mother had gone and it had seemed he was hell bent on leading everyone else skyward for his pain as well, on the end of a bullet.

“Pass that light here, Pa,” he demanded, as Taylor saw something flinch amid the pitch darkness at the back of their cavern, almost out of sight. He could hear faint movements as if someone had woken up, to only just become aware of their presence.

John looked over, feverish with fear.

“Do you think there’s another way in here?”

“Not this deep,” his son quickly answered. “Whoever’s down here shouldn’t be breathing.”

John could hear someone shifting around in the dead Sioux bodies, like they were made of air. Squelch, another one. It sounded like they were being thrown

together, maybe on top of each other.

"That ain't natural," Taylor complained, swinging the lamp through the dark, "I reckon a man ought to show himself!" he screamed, ripping open the top of his shirt in a tribal move for confrontation. "If you ain't gonna come outta there, I got a whole lot more dynamite upstairs to bring ya out! You listenin' to me?"

No reply.

John put his hand to his son's sleeve to ask him for a moment's hesitation.

"Something's wrong here," he fretted. "You know something's wrong, don't ya? You feel it like your old Pa. A man don't just ignore sticks of dynamite, only on account of him being simple, or just simply dangerous."

"Man ain't more dangerous than a red candle, Sir," Taylor reassured him respectfully, as he removed his 'Colt' from his gun belt and swung it forward on his hip. "I say, if he ain't coming out like some desert rat in a bird's nest, I'm coming in to change his mind, the stubborn mule."

Taylor stepped further into the lightless isolation, to then quickly dive behind a rotting plains rider to his right as a shell ricocheted around the dank cavern.

"Down, Pa!" he warned, as he threw some bodies hastily together in a pile for them to crouch behind.

"Must be a lunatic or something," John said, confused, his hands covered in sticky, decomposing fluids. "He's using unfresh dead folk for sandbags."

Taylor ducked from round the left ear of a long passed Cheyenne.

"So are we!" he laughed, letting off a round into the gloom. It was like Virginia City again alright, John worried. Taylor had that dumb hero thing going on, dumb on account of him not realising the hero wouldn't rob the stage or clean out a vault. He had always found himself opening up his cylinder six on the lawmen, due to his thirst for thrills and quick adventure. John had tried to cool his blood over the years with a cautionary tale or two, but feared deep down there was only two things that would put his scorch cracked leather boots on ice. He either had to send him to Alaska, or Taylor would send himself cold by taking a bullet someday. Hell, he'd probably welcome it to see that woman again. He never had quite forgiven his father for his drinking and he blamed him on account of his mother going out that night to die. Maybe he was right, John chewed over it as he spat out thick, brown mucus, discoloured with the blood from his rotting teeth. Adrenalin might save their hides this time, though.

Return fire became sporadic, as if their assailant had some sort of problem loading their piece.

"We're leaving," Taylor whispered to his Pa as he delivered more retribution from over a skull cracked cranium, to then accidently send decayed brain parts splashing over John's unsuspecting face.

"Grab your stuff and head out slowly," he advised, ducking below the hanging rock, "This is our shot."

Stone faced and uneasy, he handed the lamp back to John who was still removing lobe from the inside of his own nose, as Taylor trained his attention

forward.

“You seen who it is, ain’t ya!” John enthused. “Caught him in the glow of that Kerosene firefly. Is it the Rumfield boys again? Because if it is, I’ll shove those fire sticks where the sun don’t shine once we get up top.”

Taylor was silent, no cocksure laugh, no acknowledgement of his Pa’s amusing comment. Instead, his face had turned pale and lifeless, as if he really had stared into the very gaze of the Devil.

“There are things you don’t talk about. That just ain’t natural, you hear?”

John knew what he meant. Years of working on the first frontier railroad before his retirement had taught him to respect the unnameable.

`“You seen a spirit, boy?” he asked his junior, holding his belt tightly closed in order to keep things tidy as he wobbled up the steep incline, puffing and panting like a prairie dog.

It seemed Taylor was struggling to think straight, never mind get his words out.

“I seen a demon down there!” he confessed after a long pause, summoning every inch of courage not to break into a foolish run. “Its stare was made in the coal fires of Hell and damnation, jaw like a skull’s.”

“Well,” John remarked, astounded, “looks like you really did find old Pete Morgan and he seems mighty mad on us looking to relieve him of that there retirement fund.”

“There’s no gold in there, Pa!” Taylor realised with disappointment. There had been no glimmer of gold caught by their smouldering lantern.

After bursting from the burial chamber of a hundred dead Indian folk, John went straight for the detonator. He hoped, once he reattached the wires, that there were more explosives he could rig in time to reseal the tomb. Whatever Taylor had seen, he didn’t want it making its way up.

“Quickly, grab some sticks, boy!” he ordered. “I never want to meet what in tarnation you saw down there today, and that’s a damn certainty!”

Attaching lines to the few unused bombs they still possessed, they threw them into the open mouth of the outer breach, before bringing up the re-wound plunger.

“It was awful!” Taylor was shaking, both hands ready to complete the strong armed deed his old man didn’t have the gumption for. From the dusty air came the moans of sick dead voices, echoing from an unnatural sounding source. They gathered momentum amidst the humid air.

“Do it, Taylor!” John demanded of his addled son. “Snap out of it!”

The horses began running around. They had become restless waiting, but even more shaken in the wailing winds swirling around them.

“Press the plunger,” John begged as a six foot rotting gunslinger with a gun leaning from his side holster appeared at the entrance, a rifle slung across his crooked back. The hat was ripped and torn, yet he still held it tightly to his bony head as the winds of perdition blew an angry gale across the baron plain.

Watching the sweat of a terrified man drip down his quivering cheeks, eager to flee his own hide, Graves Snr was left with no choice. He would have to push the

lever himself or fear would damn them both. Grabbing the dirty wrists of his son's muscular hands, he forced them to slide the pole back down. The charge travelled the copper strands and in seconds, boom! Boulders crashed down like the hooves of a horse's rear spreading manure to a place that smelt just as bad. Not prepared to wait around and find out the true extent of their success, the two Graves men mounted up on crocked saddles and rode out into the forgotten sun as hard and as fast as their steeds would carry them.

They did not stop for cactus, chasm or crevice, taking fright into the ether; their very souls at stake for every distance jumped that would take them further away from their accursed hill shaft discovery. Landing back on a lucid ground, the credible world had ceased to have any meaning for them anymore. For all they knew, their rides could float away from them at any given moment before their eyes, to have them fall from a storybook page like an old sage's myth, retold in a new found bar. After miles of bad trail thundered in friction worn shoes, the horses slowly wound down into a gentle canter, as father and son dismounted to gather water spied running through a stony outcrop due north. Scaling the sides of the harsh sheering rock face, not more than a mile back, the desperados descended to the stream in silent apprehension. Thoughts of gold and wealth were far from their minds as cold started to numb their clinging fingers. A cold that only came in the harsh desert lands with nightfall. John removed his flask from his back pocket and dipped it in the cool underground spring that seeped across a tiny speck of empty lowland, along with the horse's bottle he had untied from his frayed saddle strap. It had once served as a whisky container that he wished would refill again.

Looking over to his father, Taylor still found himself speechless, but their exchanged looks expressed their feelings all too well.

"He looked mighty mean for a man made of nothing," began Graves Snr. "I mean, he had no blood around him, if he did escape that collapse, he must be mighty cold."

Taylor looked around them nervously. "He didn't walk away from that." He spat, as if trying to convince himself of the fact.

"Maybe not," John replied. He could see that Taylor was still rattled, mortified even. "We should bring the horses here once they've been watered and are well enough to set up camp."

Taylor seemed to be focusing on their plans for the dusk a little too hard, maybe to take his mind off the terrible things they had seen. It seemed more than that to John, though. It was a father's job to rightly know his son and the uncharacteristic behaviour he was displaying appeared not just to stem from the fright a dead man had delivered his way; but from something else. John believed he knew what was bothering him, why Taylor's face contorted with a black look he had worn over his adolescent brow for the best part of his young life. John decided he would come right out and say it.

"She didn't go there, if that's what you're thinking."

"Who are you talking about? Who didn't go there?" came the cautious reply.

“She’s not in Hell on account of what happened that night, when you were a boy and your mom ran out of the house in front of those horses.”

Taylor’s temper rose quickly and he grabbed his father by the strangled arteries of his flabby throat.

“You should be goin’ to Hell if anyone is,” he stated. “You drove her out and you made sure she never came back!”

A tear had welled up in the corner of his eye. John was not sure if either of them could feel compassion anymore. It must still be that unforgiving hatred that lived deep within him, refusing to let go, hatred towards a God for taking her away, and towards his Pa for letting her leave.

In the distance shimmered two fingers, pale white from inside a gathering storm. John glanced up to see them first and turned to his son. “Are we drinking tainted water or are there ghosts on that there patch of ground?”

Taylor crept closer on his knees across the bank of a trickle of liquid they’d had to scale metres downward just to reach and glanced back up to the high plain.

“It’s the spirits ‚Pa,” he had to admit in a quivering voice.

The proud descended dead stood defiantly overlooking the shaking boys with poise; brandishing their handed down Sioux beaded skull cracker war clubs and thumping them rhythmically along their bloodied breast plates. The attached horse hair drops whipped viciously across their damned shoulders, as other creeds began to emerge from the floating sands being thrown across the dry and tired wasteland.

“They’re being carried in with the storm,” John realised, gulping every inch of spit he had down into his shaking stomach. “Like a nature’s horseback ride, they could damn near follow us anywhere on the wind.”

“So what do we do?” Taylor asked in hopes that his father’s advancing years would have given him an answer to such a problem.

Graves Snr considered. “We could seek the help of one of them Indian Shamans from the noble casts further east.”

“And what if they ain’t friendly to our cause, on account of us busting open one of their resting places with a few stretches of explosives?”

John slapped Taylor’s back with a reassuring sudden hand, gripping his collar and grabbing his full attention.

“Then I guess we’re going to have to make them listen.”

He threw his glance down to his pistol handle and then spun around to see the butt of an army rifle arrive swiftly into his sweaty nose, rendering him unconscious, as another ignoble savage grabbed Taylor around his throat.

“You come with us,” snarled the rebel Cheyenne into a reddened, blood restricted ear, before his accomplice brought the same gun handle down upon a struggling Taylor’s skull.

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Darkness, nothing but the swirling, hidden darkness, to then glimpse a future

to come.

From the blink of a sore and bloodshot retina, John could see the flickering embers of a burning damnation as it threw out its sparkling hot enticements near to his ash sodden face. He could hear talk. A pair of demons consorted on the Graves' family fate over the screaming, flame licked body of a rotating settler, a spit roasting sinner inhaling his last breaths of sooty air. John stayed motionless, unable to move as he listened in to the foreigner's unrecognised dialect, yelling out. He was asking for mercy, that much he could tell. You could always recognise the tones of a man begging for his life in any language. John licked his dry, tasteless lips. So this wasn't Hell. If this European traveller was crying out for release, to be saved, then maybe they still had a chance for survival, but they would need to make their quiet escape soon.

The apparent dominance of one of the men singled him out as leader, Crow Dog, master of a rebel Indian outfit shunned from its noble roots, stood sadistically over his camp fire like an impatient devil residing over his tortures. He withdrew a sharp bladed dagger, held it hovering above his captured soul's crisping head, so that the next time his partner turned over the stake this unfortunate voyager had been tied to, an agonised victim would glimpse his own shrivelled, terrified face in the knife's reflected glare. As the wood began to buckle under the intense heat, the subordinate ordered the bound feast around to the screams of its own hideously disfigured image, before the vengeful figure of Crow Dog brought it swiftly to peace, piercing cold steel into their victim's drumming heart. It stopped shrieking almost immediately, a mid-sentenced yelp brought to a sudden close, body unable to take any more mutilating perversions, whilst Crow Dog licked the sizzling juices of his prize bounty from his blade before the fire had its way and brought the charred meat crashing to the ground. He glanced over to his minion, Running Antelope, from across the encroaching heat with the wild stare of a rabid wolf.

"We will take skin of pale face boy for our masks," he ordered, looking over at Taylor's helpless state. John shut his eyes fast. Even clearer now came the words, amplified by his lack of other senses. It was true after all. There was a band of ignoble savages slitting throats and carving their plates with any light skinned supper that chanced into their grubby hands, a race of cannibalistic outcasts, stalking the Great Plains for sustenance and penitence alike.

Then it came, the howling wind whipping up from all directions. Crow Dog picked a sewn battle mask stitched from his victim's battered personas, swiftly untucking its gruesome edges from within his unbuckled saddlebag. The surface lay ambiguously covered with a mixture of blood and ink scratched from the native berried trees of a lost home, an Indian façade, as if to signify a tribal message to opponents, forged from his untamed past.

The lowland flora bowed down to the gusts of a moaning dead in apprehensive reverence. Running Antelope gathered the parts of his newly acquired rifle, stripped from their damned traveller's things strewn across the camp and prepared for unholy battle. The apparitions of long dead warriors began to appear from the gale to file side

by side along the border of their makeshift site, constantly replicating in shape, size and number. Their eyes burned hellishly at the rebel savages as Crow Dog followed their gloomy stare to the bodies in the dust. He turned to Running Antelope with a shaking dagger.

“They’ve come for the pale devils,” he guessed. “They are watched over by angry spirits, cursed!”

A confused Running Antelope surveyed the usual sight of presumed cowboy trash lying unconscious at their feet.

“If we harm them, harm may come to us,” he concluded. “Should we not take them to the Sioux chief? If not, the dead might hunt us evermore.”

Crow Dog nodded in agreement, putting his hand on the barrel of Running Antelope’s pristine new firing piece, lowering it to the ground.

“Our legends talk of two boys tracked by a nature they found angry, to then be saved by the Great Spirit.” Crow Dog’s disdain for the fair complexion of his world’s invaders seethed behind the expressionless face.

“We shall let great Shaman Abedabun decide their fate and that of the unrested.”

John began to lull himself into a deep sleep again, to avoid further Sioux or Cheyenne concussive manoeuvres. He had heard of Abedabun, the name meant Light of Day. John wished fervently to see another dawn with his son unharmed. The light of day, a place he would cherish unlike any other that had rolled by, shamefully unnoticed before now.

John felt himself thrown over the back saddle of a frightened horse, his bound hands and feet fastened to its primitive harness. Peeking over to the other rider, he saw Taylor had already been secured, blissfully unaware of their predicament as they were promptly ridden roughshod around a screaming perimeter of smoke men. As they darted in between the solidifying, bone chilling cries of an army of shimmering tribesman, a spectral hand reached out for John’s soul, narrowly sliding its icy fingertips along his boot heel as the exodus feverishly continued through a narrow pass and across the forgotten lands, part stolen from their people.

As the howling breeze started to fade from hearing, John awoke to the bumbling sound of Taylor nursing a sore head with a wet handkerchief compress, whilst stumbling around like a clumsy bear through the belongings of a dark wooden Indian trunk. John jumped up, exuberant. They had made it safely to more civilised climes, then he realised where they were. A large tipi stretched overhead, encircling them inside the skin lined with animal hides. Outside, the weather sounded abnormally blustery, whilst in the corner sat Taylor’s trunk of interest and a collection of bones and charms tied neatly in a row, stretching along a rope line suspended by pine supports. Scrambling to his feet, John felt at his belt for his trusty gun. It still hung there, idle. He checked the chamber to find it had been emptied of its eager shells.

“You should look at this stuff,” enthused an excited Taylor from deep inside the receptacle. “These Indians have some crazy medicines and trinkets.”

Looking through the tipi flaps, John could see two burly guards with hunting blades, the sun's position telling him they'd been sleeping well into the middle of the day. A stranger in flamboyant ceremonial head dress seemed to approach the tent. Taylor continued his useless quest to find something to aid their escape. John knew there was no such thing this time. The wind was starting to hurl itself around the sandy floor outside. It would only be a matter of time before the gale intensified, bringing with it the hunting party of an angered, undead nation.

"You won't find what you seek in there," Abedabun informed Taylor as he entered, bent over to accommodate the plumage of his large head apparel. "What you seek cannot be found in the bottom of a box, but rather in the empty grave of our sorrow."

Taylor removed himself from the container and reached for his gun.

"He means the remains of chief what's his name," John stammered, unable to remember the noble chieftain's inherited title. His fingers itched for his stout peacemaker, still hanging on his belt.

"Your bullets would be as useful against me as they would against the ghosts that build around us, travelling in the great wind."

"You know about them following us?" Taylor asked, confused. "Did they follow you here after kidnapping us?"

"We did not bring you here!" the chieftain exclaimed sourly. "You are here because of Chief Wichita, a name you will not forget in my presence again!"

"I knew him," John admitted with a snarling cough of a traveller's dry throat.

"And you knew Peter Morgan too. I remember him bringing you to our people's meetings many moons ago."

Taylor jumped upon his father with gun still raised, shoving it tightly into his squat nose.

"My own father, making deals with Indians," he crowed as an old fashioned scolding. "My father selling out his own kind!"

Abedabun interrupted. "Your father came to witness the plight of our people at the hands of your kind!" he bellowed, "Peter Morgan was a friend to our people."

Pushing the barrel from his crumpled nose, John stepped back a few paces in order for Taylor to think it over. John looked down at his dishevelled boots, disguising his shamed face from the trusting new king of an old frontier.

"Old Pete betrayed you, he betrayed us both," he admitted.

"I helped him hold up that train carrying the gold. He told me he was giving the gold back to you, on account it was already stolen from your people, but he lied. He took the boiler shovel from the cab and beat the driver to death with it, wouldn't stop, then dealt with the guards."

Taylor caught his Pa's sad gaze and saw his tears welling in recollection of that night.

"I shouldn't have helped him. He just wanted the bullion for himself. He just wanted to be rich, same as any other man."

The chieftain sat down in front of a back-rest made from worn willow and

contemplated this shocking revelation.

"Did you find it?" he asked, disillusioned enough to not even trust their tongues sideswiping answer.

John sat down in front of the chief to show his alliance with them by displaying an open and relaxed pose with which to exchange the two halves of their fractured past.

"I'm afraid we ain't, but I just know that Wichita has something to do with its whereabouts. Why would he have been so close to him?"

"How did they meet?" Taylor asked Abedabun.

"During the building of the vast tracks that ran through our reserve back then, Wichita was shot by a pale face devil attempting to drive our people from the land. Leaderless, it was thought our descendants would lay down their tomahawks, but they did not. They fought even harder against unfair advantage of firearm." He spoke with pride. "Peter pale face took Wichita here, to the other side of the reserve, in order to fix his poison leg."

Taylor walked back to the hard wood trunk and began rooting through it, until he produced a thin cord. He lifted it for his Pa to see. If he was right, this would be his big moment.

"This cord is for tying up wounds, right?"

Abedabun nodded solemnly, remembering the incident with a great distress.

"And Old Pete sewed up the wound, right?" Taylor continued, one hand still on his bruised head. "What if Pete hid the rolled up map telling us where the gold is, in Wichita's fractured leg?"

"Impossible!" thundered the chief.

John rubbed his unshaven chin. He was right, it made perfect sense.

"Tell the chief the children's rhyme on the burial chamber wall, son."

"We blew open a cave that had bodies of Indians inside it, from the railroad massacre, along with old Pete who was up and walking, but not in a telling mood." He continued, as John spotted his boy's storytelling error, hiding his head deep within his work scarred hands.

"You desecrated one of our people's tombs!" the chief screamed furiously.

"But-" Taylor continued, "We found some old boards on the entrance wall. There was a rhyme scrawled along them there panels and it said *'From golden bones will know my ills.'* Pete had a weakness for wealth; his ills were caused by gambling debts and free and loose women for sale. The golden bone is the bone containing the map."

Abedabun smiled.

"Your son is smart," he observed, "He is a credit to you. The map must be sewn into the leg bone of our beloved chief Wichita."

John remembered the story all too well. He had worked on the railway for ten long years and had already recalled, quite clearly, that the railroad company had cremated Wichita's body in a train engine's furnace. The body was cremated. Damn it.

“The gold was cursed,” Abedabun reflected. “You were almost eaten alive by savages and chased by spirits for its material worth.”

“Not to mention shot at by an undead Pete Morgan,” Taylor added, “and when did we nearly get eaten anyways?” They both ignored Taylor’s comment and continued.

“We need to put those spirits to rest,” John said, “on account of it being our fault an’ all.”

Abedabun removed from his heavy robe a pipe that contained a hollowed out bone at its slender tip and another for tobacco at the very end.

After passing it to the eldest, John, Abedabun lit a small fire in the centre of the tipi and stood up to remove a flap above their heads for the escaping smoke.

“You must first make peace with each other if you will hope to bring our people to rest and yourselves,” he insisted, ushering John to dip the pipe into the flames and inhale its contents. He did so respectfully and passed it to Taylor.

“Time to breathe in a little forgiveness, boy,” he urged, as he handed him the braided, leather deer antler. Taylor pursed his lips and inhaled.

“It is settled,” the chief declared. “Your differences are no longer, your indifference the same.”

As the fumes reached the bottom of Taylor’s lungs, he began to choke.

“What’s in this thing?” he demanded, as a long haired Cheyenne woman entered the hut with water.

“A gift from the Spanish explorers,” Abedabun explained. “Part of a trading of our cultures.”

“I’d like to trade with her,” Graves Jnr joked, looking into the dark brown eyes of the perfectly proportioned Indian maiden handing him a bowl of stream water. She looked confused, not seeming to understand the meaning of his words, but smiled at the suggestive manner in which he looked at her. At that moment, a warrior returned from one of the tribes scout parties, hair scarred a silver grey with shock. The other villagers helped him dismount his steed and hurriedly carried him to Abedabun’s tent, bursting through the flaps in a panic. Putting him down on a soft mat that resided as a comfortable floor, Abedabun checked the rambling Sioux’s temperature. His palms were sweaty and head feverish.

“What’s wrong with him?” John asked, looking over to Taylor. “Stay away from him, boy, he may have something incurable.”

On further examination, the chief sighed a sorrowful, pained breath.

“He is trapped in the fear of his own troubled vision,” he concluded, as the villagers left, distraught.

“What did you see?” he asked the addled spy. “What did you see?”

He recognised Abedabun as Taylor passed his bowl for the injured Indian to drink. The fluid disappeared down a gulping gullet, dangerously deprived of liquid.

“A bone man!” he shouted out. “By Bears Rock, he killed our people and left me for dead.”

They looked to see blood seeping from the lone survivor’s thigh. Cholena –

that which sours, ripped the tail from Taylor's worn shirt and, once doused in water, held it along the scout's wound, whilst stroking his forehead.

John put his arm around his son's shoulder.

"It's what's left walking of old Pete Morgan, nothing but animated greed. We best be leaving before the spirits arrive," he informed Abedabun. "We have a meeting at Bears Rock and this time we won't miss."

The chief returned their bullets to them along with a final gift, the last inches of gold dust possessed by his tribe concealed in an old leather purse.

"Peter Morgan has a weakness for it. When the time is right, you will know what to do."

John nodded.

"You will also take Cholena with you, she knows the way to Bears Rock well from her hunting rides as a child. She will be of great use to you."

Taylor laughed aloud. "What kind of huntin' can a little woman do?" She took the piece pipe and directed the slim end towards Taylor's Adam's apple before he could reload his gun.

"I guess that's what she can do," smirked an amused old man Graves, as they said their uneasy goodbyes and headed for fresh horses, penned on the outskirts of the settlement. As they kicked the flat earth up on the end of their tired boots, huddled groups of a two tribe caravan spoke in native whispers, looks as distrusting as any Taylor had experienced from his past female relationships. Cholena mounted the horse first.

"We hurry!" she insisted.

So she did know some American words.

"Not too fast," Taylor commented as he struggled himself onto his saddle, compress slipping through his slippery fingers and falling to the ground. "I want some time for us to get to know each other."

He knew she understood him, eyes shyly hiding behind her delicate fringe. Then he began to worry as she drew his attention to her sturdy war club. Pushing her thighs in tight to the horse's ribs from beneath a brightly stained blue tunic, she ushered the trail in steady single file towards John's ominous showdown with a very old friend.

As they rode up to the enormous structure of a mile wide plinth, covered in the claw marks of an aforementioned bear, John found it to be everything he had been told by his old town preacher. Devil's Tower his pastor had called it, a delightful title for a desolate mountainous shape, seemingly stretching endlessly up into the rapidly clouding sky. The story had been told during a particularly dreary Sunday afternoon parable on the power of prayer, although reverend Mark Andrews had made it perfectly clear that he only believed in the Holy Spirit.

It was a tale of two children on their way through the plains lowlands to collect berries. They had been spotted by a mighty grizzly that had chased them for miles. Convinced they were to become the resident's evening meal and worn out with the exhaustion caused by the chase, the children asked the spirits to save them. From

beneath their feet rose a mighty rock which transported them high above the famished beast. It clawed and scraped at the rock but was unable to get to the children, thus rendering them unharmed. The tale was unclear about how they ever returned from such a behemoth piece of landscape. A further summation was that the great spirit of a giant eagle picked up the frightened figures and removed them from the dangerous height, returning them to their village. He was unsure if this was anything that had taken place, but after today nothing was certain anymore. Dismounting at the monolith's base, Cholena helped John down from his ride.

"You ok to go?" she unintentionally patronised.

"I'm like a coyote in a hen house," he sang, putting a brave face on the aches and pains that advanced years had brought with it.

Taylor swung round and jumped into the middle of the chatty pair, boasting. "My old man here has plenty of stories but I'm the one that's lived 'em."

John found himself compelled to retell the disaster of Virginia City, but since partaking in the pipe ritual, decided not to bother, after all, bad blood could never be strong blood and they would need to stand together if they were to conquer the twisted lust of a zombie plagued with gold fever.

"Now you stay here whilst we go find the bad man," Taylor advised Cholena slowly, spelling out each syllable. She understood, promptly replying, "You stay here!"

Taking her club proudly in her delicate hands, she began to scour the base of the legendary plateau, to find another visitor's horse laying dead around the corner.

Taylor inspected the remains, to find himself overcome by a rotting stench of death that even the sun could not be responsible for.

"Think the thing dropped from death itself, overwhelmed by it."

Inspecting the fly ridden corpse, John had to agree. He looked closely at a moving shadow on the ground, the speck of a man. A man up high that had them pegged, then shots rang out. A barrage of quick hammered shapes of sharp and unholy injustice hurled down on their position from the plateau of Bear Rock.

"Sneaky little son of a bitch hid the gold up top for every wide-eyed eagle to see. Millions of dollars just sitting there, glinting out in the open!"

"Now that's blood money, son," John reminded him. "We need to get it back to the reservation and get ourselves the hell out of this situation. You didn't see those spectral Indians up close, did ya? It's time to dream another dream, Taylor, time for some peace, that's after I make some with my girl here."

"He couldn't hit an ant with a whisky bottle at that range." John began puffing his overweight frame up the huge face of a jagged altar with a pick axe he had brought from the box of tricks in Abedabun's tipi.

"You're too old, Pa!" shouted Taylor after him, gripping the edges with his fingertips and length of noose drawn rope as they ascended the rock together.

"You should show respect to father," Cholena lectured, shouting up from her first steps taken towards the barren top. With the steady, conquering feet of the incline came the pointless return of fire. Bullets flew harmlessly through the air,

shamefully off target, but now the final approach beckoned. A last stretch of fifty metres stood between them, the bullion and an investor who would do anything to secure his long term investment, never to see it fall.

“You got greedy again, Pete!” John yelled. “You led us right to the money.”

The putrefied, skeletal remains looked back and forth anxiously before disappearing from view. He had no choice and returned with a menacingly large bar of gold. Taking careful aim, he launched it down towards John’s head. It bounced off the monolith and continued to freefall out of reach.

“I’m gonnnaaaaaa finishhhhhhhhh youuuuuuuu Johnnn Graaaaaavessssss!” Pete hissed with a half decomposed tongue between rotted teeth. Again came another bar of shiny metal. Taylor swung in front of Cholena to bat it away with his arm.

“You missed me again, Pete, just like you missed your chance to rest. That train’s left the station.”

“I willll havvveeeee myy gooooooooolllllllld!” it wailed defiantly. With a last swing of the rope, Taylor made it topside first, desperately clawing at the plateau edge and levered himself up. As he did so, he looked at the infamous Pete Morgan standing over him. It seemed he had spent most of his life staring down the barrel of someone else’s pistol in his quest for this man’s ill-gotten gains. Pete let him rise up slowly, before restraining him with the rope and dragging him backwards across the floor to his pot of gold. Coughing up sandstone, he laid helpless on his stomach, as from behind he could hear the clicking close of a loaded 'Winchester' rifle, meaning business. Cholena and John arrived to find themselves greeted by a Mexican style standoff.

There was a chill in the air, an approaching breeze that carried on it tribal death. It began to whip up their fears.

“I’lllll killlll thhheeeeee, booyyyyy,” Pete stammered, barely coherent in his excited state.

“I already lost my wife after you killed all those young boys on the rails! It sent my car straight into liquor central and I lost my girl. I’m gonna make damn sure I bring my son home!”

John levelled his Smith & Wesson and targeted the barrel sight precisely on Pete’s tired brow.

“Give him back to me and you can have this!” he yelled, throwing the bag of gold dust over to him with his other hand. The light winds picked it up, knocking it off course and further over the summit, slippery polished by the cleansing heat of the sun.

Pete reached out to grab it as it flew over his head, catching its strings and sending the gold dust spreading over the edge. He turned to get hold of its few remains and slipped over the side, screaming, ricocheting off the steep sediment to fall into shattered pieces at the bottom.

Taylor breathed a sigh of relief, looking over at the two warriors, their proud silhouettes still before a blazing ball of light from the Heavens.

“I think we’re gonna be alright, Pa,” he half smiled.

***

Stretched out in the glow of an evening's twilight, John pondered the life he had been coerced into, whilst remembering his dearest Lynette and imagining her smiling down on them right about now. The approaching storm had ended, taking with it the calm souls of a people at rest.

"So, Cholena, would you like to show me more of your traditions when we get down, on account of me saving your pretty life an' all?" Taylor cheekily enquired.

"For saving my life," a red faced, red blooded Cholena tritely replied.

John began to shake with an old man's fit of giggles at the sneaky proposition he had overheard.

"So, does that mean I can go back to our farm now?" he asked Taylor.

Taylor considered. "We have to wait for a soaring eagle spirit strong enough to rescue us and all the gold first," he laughed, leaning on more money than he'd ever seen in his life. "And you still have to check in at the post office next month, mind."

"Why?"

"I'll send you a telegraph with the details," Taylor said. "A trader told me all about it in a back street saloon last week, turns out a heist in Dodge City went wrong and the perpetrator hid the cash. It's never been found. Old Pete Morgan's brother, Bill, was a bank robber!"

THE WICKED WIDGET

WRITTEN BY **MARK SLADE**

ART BY **IDA ASTERO**





MILES AND MILES UNDER THE EARTH,
UNDER YOUR HOUSE, HOME AND HEARTH
(AND ARE PROUD TO BE IT),
ARE A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO CALL THEMSELVES WIDGETS.
THEY ARE A KIND PEOPLE.
THOUGHTFUL, TOO.
IF YOU WANTED AN APPLE
THEY WOULD GIVE YOU TWO.



WIDGETS ARE TWO FOOT TWO,
SKINNY AND ROUND,
LONG ON TOP AND FAT ON THE WAY DOWN –
BULBOUS NOSE AND FLAMING RED HAIR TO BOOT.

IT IS THEIR CUSTOM
TO ENTERTAIN YOU.
AND WHERE THEY COME FROM
IT IS CIRCUS NIGHT FOR ALL,
SERVING FRUMPLE CAKE SNOODALL
AND GRABBLE GOOSE SODA FOR YOUR REFRESHMENT, IF YOU
CHOOSE.



THEY PUT ON A SHOW
NIGHT AND DAY.
TIGER HIGH WIRE ACTS, ELEPHANT BALLROOM DANCERS IN DISPLAY,
AND PING-PONG-PLAYING WIDGET CLOWNS LINE UP IN A ROW.



NOT EVERYONE LIKED CIRCUS FRIVOLITY.
AS A MATTER OF FACT,
THE ACT
BECAME ONE WIDGET'S HUMILIATION.

WICKY WIDGET WAS JUST THAT:
A JOKE
AND MORE.
HE WAS THE SMALLEST WIDGET IN WIDGET LORE.
HE WAS EVEN AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE CLOWN FOLK.



WIKI'S HATRED GREW AND GREW.
FROM THE OTHERS HE WITHDREW.
HE LOVED BOOKS,
IN SPITE OF CRITICISM AND DIRTY LOOKS.
HE WAS BEATEN MERCIFULLY,
AND HIS WORDS OFTEN MISCONSTRUED,
WHILE THE OTHERS CHEERED GLEEFULLY.

HE SNAPPED. HIS MIND CAME UNGLUED.
HE GOT IT
IN HIS HEAD,
TO MAKE SURE HIS FELLOW WIDGETS
WERE DEAD.
HE BUILT MONSTER METAL MEN
AND EVEN A FIVE THOUSAND FOOT OVEN,
BUT THE MASS FUNERAL NEVER CONVENED.



THROUGH YEAR AFTER YEAR
OF MUCH NEEDED PHYSCHIATRIC HELP FOR NIGHTMARES
AND CLOWN FEAR,
WIKI CONVINCED EVERYONE HE WAS WELL.
HE DELVED INTO HIS RESEARCH AND FOUND A SPELL.



FROM THE GODS BELOW
HE RELEASED DEVILS OF OLD.



THEY WERE KNOWN AS SCREECHES.
WITH THEIR LONG SNOUTS
AND FANGS SHARP,
BLOOD RED EYES,
TONGUES LIKE LEECHES,
WINGS TO HELP THEM FLY ABOVE THE HIGH RISE.
THEY WOULD SCOOP UP WIDGETS AND EAT THEM IN ONE
SCOFF.



WIKI RUNG HIS BITTER HANDS,
JUMPED UP AND DOWN FOR JOY,
ONLY TO BECOME A PART OF HIS OWN PLAN.
HE WAS EATEN BY A SCREECH BEFORE IT COULD LAND.



END

About: **Mark Slade**

Mark Slade has had stories published with *Burial Day Books*, *Wordhaus*, *Blood Moon Rising*, and is in vampire anthology, *You can't kill me--I'm already dead*.
He also runs the short story podcast *DARK DREAMS.*
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